



What Is Christian Cultural Engagement?

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I. The inevitability of engaging the culture

Often people say, “Keep your religion private. Don’t bring it into your work as an artist, journalist, or manager. Be neutral. Don’t impose your views on others in any way.”

Ironically, that itself is a very specific philosophical worldview found in western cultures—namely, the idea that only individuals have the right to decide what is right or wrong for them. That may or may not be true, but it is a belief, and only one belief among many about the nature of things. If you insist that others keep their religious beliefs private is itself a quasi-religious belief (an unprovable faith assertion of your own—about right and wrong—that you are urging others to adopt. In other words, you have a view of life that you are ‘evangelizing’ with. Everybody does this.

Anyone who desires to see the culture move in a particular direction (e.g. “I wish society were more like X”) operates from some sort of worldview that he or she would like to see have more influence in the culture. Everybody, therefore, is engaging culture and seeking to renew it.

II. Some reasons that Christians don’t influence culture

Christians are marginal and uninfluential in our culture. Why? This comes to a great degree from “dualism”—the lack of a comprehensive Christian worldview. Dualism separates the spiritual/sacred from the rest of life. It originally had roots in Hellenistic thought that viewed the material world as bad and the spiritual world as good. Dualism has two effects.

First, Christians do not do their work in the places and institutions where culture is forged. (At least not in significant numbers.) As a result of dualism, there is a widespread belief that the only way to truly serve God is through direct ministry—teaching, evangelizing, discipling. This has effectively removed Christians from places of cultural influence for generations. It sees the church and its activities as good and untainted, while the secular world is bad and polluting.

This feeling is understandable. Many workplaces are so filled with excessive competition, superficiality, politics, greed, and cruelty that it is tempting to chuck the secular job and just minister within the context of Christian community. And even if you don’t do that, you may simply opt to live and spend your lives living in the parts of the country that are more affordable and far more filled with Christians—thus having a more traditional culture—than live and work in places like New York City, Los Angeles, Washington DC, San Francisco, Boston, etc. But the desire to live in more traditional environments has effectively removed most Christians from parts of the country that have the most cultural influence.

Second, Christians do not integrate their faith into their work in thorough, distinct, creative ways. Dualism is that it seals off our personal beliefs and faith from the way we actually live and work in the world. Christianity is seen as a means of individual spiritual peace and strength, and not as a comprehensive interpretation of reality that affects everything we do.

Under its influence Christians look to their faith for personal salvation, but the rest of their lives is shaped by popular culture, which brings a very different interpretation of the universe to bear on things, and/or the worldviews of the dominant figures and groups in their particular field of vocation. We simply don’t think out the implications for our work through the lens of our faith in and experience of the gospel.

The gospel should be as effective in moving people out of “dualism” as for moving people out of “legalism.” The two are related! Legalistic Christianity leads to dualistic Christianity. A legalistic Christianity



is much more likely to see the secular world as a polluted place to flee from. When you don't grasp the gospel of grace, you tend toward a Pharisaical obsession with ritual purity or cleanliness. Since in this scenario we are saved by the purity and rightness of our lives, it encourages people to stay very much within the church where we don't have to deal with unbelievers. Also, while the Bible tells you a great deal about how the church should operate, it doesn't tell you how to run your business in a Christian way. That takes reflection and creativity. The "everything is black or white" world of legalists cannot cope with that kind of flexibility and uncertainty. They are extremely concerned with knowing what the exactly right biblical position is on everything. So legalism simply tells laypeople to be sexually pure and honest out in the business world, and to give all your money to the ministers and the church where we *really* do the Lord's work.

The opposite of dualistic Christianity is "worldviewish" Christianity.

III. Different models for engaging culture

Since the 1960s in the US, there has been a significant shift from the situation in which all the major cultural institutions supported broadly Judeo-Christian understandings of life and moral behavior to a place in which none of them do. This created a crisis in the church. The question was: how do we engage and relate to a society that is now so different than the church in its beliefs and practices? There have been four basic approaches.

1. Engage culture strictly through evangelizing individuals.

Rationale: If enough individuals are converted to Christ, the society changes; Christians can change the world one life at a time. Problems: a) Even if 80 percent of the population were Christian believers, they would have almost no cultural influence if the Christians did not live in cultural centers and did not work in culture-forging fields such as academia, publishing, media, entertainment, and the arts. b) Also, if the church does not think a lot about culture—what it is, what parts of it are good, bad, indifferent according to the Bible—it will uncritically imbibe and be assimilated to the culture.

2. Engage culture largely through political and single-issue activism.

Rationale: If enough Christians possess political power, the society changes. Problems: a) This assumes that the Christians who gain political power have thoroughly thought out the implications of gospel beliefs for areas of public policy, which, needless to say, is a big assumption. b) Moreover, politics often (though not always) is "downstream" from cultural changes forged in the academy, the arts, the media, etc. c) After the 1960s, when the mainline churches became very active in liberal politics, it alienated huge numbers of the US population; after the 1990s, when evangelical churches became very active in conservative politics, it alienated huge numbers again. (Robert D. Putnam, *American Grace*)

3. Engage culture by becoming more relevant to needs and sensibilities.

Rationale: If enough Christians stopped denouncing error and started serving and caring, the church would become relevant and have influence again. Problems: a) Liberal/modernist Christianity made this shift in the early part of the 20th century, but it led to a decline. The problem is that when Christians are too much like the rest of the culture, they have nothing unique to offer. Why even need the church? b) Today many younger Christians, unhappy with the strident tone of past Christian churches, are moving into the same path as older 'modernists', playing down the importance of theology and doctrine, moving away from evangelism into service. Similar decline might come.

4. Don't engage culture; just be the church.

Rationale: If Christians try to change the world it always corrupts them, or leads to discouragement. It's not the job of Christians to engage culture or change the world. Just make the church what it should be. Problems: a) As in #1 above—no one can really avoid "engaging culture" because we live here. Christians are necessarily both receiving and creating culture in the process of living and working. So they need to actively think about culture and try to engage it positively or they will unwittingly be shaped by the culture. b) Was it really wrong for Christians to work for the end of slavery? Didn't that make the world a better



place to live? Wasn't that worth doing? Sometimes Christians *can* make a change in society that is good.

Each of these approaches either have a too negative view of God's common grace (see below) or too positive a view of the culture. The right balance, is that Christians are to be a *counter-culture for the common good*. This balance comes from some good theology.

IV. A worldview that helps us engage culture

Creation (Incarnation). The doctrine of creation tells us that that the material world is important. Genesis 1–2 shows us that God created it deliberately. Psalm 145 tells us that he has a delight in and love for everything he has made (Ps. 145:9, 16–17) and that all things he has made, even inanimate objects, are praising and glorifying him simply by being what he created them to be (Ps. 19:1–6; 148; 150). This view stands against other traditional beliefs about creation: Eastern religions' (monistic) view that the material universe is unreal and Western views that creation is either eternally existent or the result of a cosmic accident. According to the Bible, the material world is both real and deliberately designed by God.

In addition, the doctrine of creation tells us that the material world is good. At the time of creation God declared that everything he made was very good (Gen. 1–2). There was not a thing wrong with it; God made all things good and whole. Matter and human nature are not flawed and weak by design.

The ultimate proof of God's commitment to the absolute goodness of concrete material reality is the doctrine of the incarnation. There is no other religion with a view of the material world as so real and so good. The fact that God became physical affirms the goodness of creation and physical matter, so in one sense the doctrine of incarnation only confirms what the doctrine of creation already revealed. But the incarnation has ramifications of its own. It means that God is working in the ordinary, if we only have eyes to see it. If Jesus became incarnate to live among the ordinary, we should not despise ordinary life.

The implication here, foundational to a Christian worldview, is that the world is good in itself. The arc of an eagle's flight, the sound of the ocean's waves, the growth of a tree, the melody of music—all of these things are beautiful and good in themselves.¹ In the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit, God does not simply save souls for eternity but also renews the material world (Psalm 104). A major part of God's work is his delight in continuing to sustain and cultivate creation (Ps. 65:9–13; 145:21; 147:15–20). If God himself does both of these things, how can one say that an artist or banker is engaged in "secular work" and that only professional ministers are doing "the Lord's work"? That view does not fit with the biblical view of creation, for God is the artist of and an investor in the material world. As Mark Noll asks,

Who formed the world of nature (which provides the raw material for physical sciences)? Who formed the universe of human interactions (which is the raw material of politics, economics, sociology, and history)? Who is the source of all harmony, form, and narrative pattern (which is the raw material for art)? Who is the source of the human mind (which is the raw material for philosophy and psychology)? And who, moment by moment, maintains the connection between our minds and the world beyond our minds? God did, God does.²

Kingdom. Second, the doctrine of the kingdom tells us that human sin—rebellion against the rightful kingship of our Creator God—has led to breakdown and disintegration in every area of life. The world was created as a place of complete flourishing and harmony (*shalom*) under God's rule. Sin, which is resistance to God's authority, led to the unraveling of creation. Relationships with God, other races and classes, individuals, and physical nature itself will disintegrate where God is not acknowledged as King.

¹ Some might think that comparing an eagle's flight, which is a part of nature, with a piece of music, which is man-made, is comparing apples and oranges. But an eagle is skillfully using the physics (aerodynamics) of the material world, and a musician is doing the same thing with sound.

² Mark A. Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1995).



The doctrine of the kingdom predicts the reentry of God’s ruling power through Christ’s death and resurrection. If every part of the world is broken by sin, then the goal of Christ’s salvation must be the renewing of every part of creation. Hearts, relationships, communities, and practices are healed and rewoven as they come under the authority of Jesus, through his Word and Spirit (Ps. 72; Col. 1:16–20; Eph. 1:9–10). Redemption, more than simply the saving of souls, involves the ultimate healing of all creation: the reunification of all humanity, the reinstatement of cultural shalom, and the end of physical decay and death (Isa. 11:1–10). But even now it means bringing the health and coherence of Christ’s lordship back into every aspect of human life. The Christian church is to be a new society in which the world can see what family life, business practices, race relations, and all aspects of life can be under the kingship of Jesus Christ.

The ultimate proof of God’s commitment to redeeming the entire world is the resurrection. The bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ as the “firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep” (1 Cor. 15:20) proves that God not only made the spiritual and the material but also will redeem both the spiritual and the physical.

According to the doctrine of the kingdom, we can understand the world only when we realize that it was originally created good in itself, that it is fallen and marred by sin, and that it can be redeemed under Christ the healing King. This simple statement is much more radical than you may think!

Compared to the Bible, worldviews identify one created thing as the problem with the world and another created thing as the solution or salvation. In contrast, Christianity says that the only problem with the world is sin and the only salvation is through Jesus alone.

To illustrate: The Marxist worldview assumes that all of society’s problems are the result of powerful, greedy capitalists’ refusal to share economic production with the masses and that the solution is a totalitarian state. Only the Christian worldview assumes that all of society’s problems are the result of sin. According to Al Wolters,

The great danger is to always single out some aspect of God’s good creation and identify it, rather than the alien intrusion of sin, as the villain. Such an error conceives as the good–evil dichotomy as intrinsic to the creation itself. . . . Something in the good creation is identified as [the source] of evil. In the course of history, this “something” has been variously identified as . . . the body and its passions (Plato and much of Greek philosophy), as culture in distinction from nature (Rousseau and Romanticism), as authority figures in society and family (psychodynamic psychology), as economic forces (Marx), as technology and management (Heidegger and existentialists). . . . As far as I can tell, the Bible is unique in its rejection of all attempts to either demonize some part of creation as the root of our problems or to idolize some part of creation as the solution.³

Therefore, Christians should be the most nuanced of cultural observers, careful not to divide the world into good and bad. Christians should acknowledge that every area of society is tainted and broken by sin and in need of spiritual renewal and cultural overhaul. That means that we can bring redemption into even the secular aspects of life by engaging in professional enterprises from a comprehensive worldview that encompasses the doctrines of creation and kingdom.

The implications are quite important and far-reaching. We cannot separate our spiritual life from our so-called secular life. Every part of our life—vocational, civic, familial, recreational, material, sexual, financial, political—is to be presented as a “living sacrifice” to God (Rom. 12:1–2.) We cannot conduct our vocational life with the same values and attitudes as everyone else and confine our spiritual life to weekends and evenings. We must learn to ask questions such as, If God is the most important thing, how should I be conducting my business? How should I be spending my money? How should I live in my neighborhood and municipality?

³ Albert M. Wolters, *Creation Regained: A Transforming View of the World* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1985), 50.



Common grace

What do Christians have in common with people who apparently have not experienced saving grace? As Richard Mouw, in *He Shines in All that's Fair: Culture and Common Grace*, puts it,

Is there a non-saving grace that is at work in the broader reaches of human cultural interaction, a grace that expedites a desire on God's part to bestow certain blessings on all human beings, elect and non-elect alike—blessings that provide the basis for Christians to co-operate with, and learn from, non-Christians?⁴

According to the Bible, the answer is yes.

Psalms 19 differentiates between a kind of “wordless speech” about God, which comes through nature and tells us about God's glory, and a propositional revelation which comes through the Bible. Romans 1 and 2 confirm that there is a primordial knowledge of God that all human beings have. In Romans 2:14,15, he says that God's law is written on the heart of every human being. They have innate senses of honest, justice, love, the golden rule, and so on.⁵ All people know at some deep level (see below) that there is a God, that we are his creatures, that we know we should serve him, and so on.

There is a general understanding among Christians that raw nature reveals God apart from the Bible. That is, most understand that apart from the Bible and saving faith, God reveals himself generally to all people through the magnificence of nature—as they view the ocean, the mountains, etc. But God also shows common grace (reveals knowledge of himself) through human culture. For human culture is simply a wise recognition of and cultivation (thus the very word *culture*) of nature.

Isaiah 28:23-29 says, “When a farmer plows for planting...when he has leveled the surface... does he not plant wheat in its place, barley in its plot, and spelt in its field? His God instructs him and teaches him the right way...Grain must be ground to make bread...all this also comes from the Lord Almighty, wonderful in counsel and magnificent in wisdom.” This is remarkable. Isaiah tells us that anyone who becomes a skillful farmer, or who brings an advancement in agriculture, is being taught by God. One writes about this text: “What appears as a discovery (the proper season and conditions for sowing, farm management, rotation of crops, etc.) is actually the Creator opening his book of creation and revealing his truth.”⁶

Now all human culture is ultimately the same thing as farming. (Remember the Mark Noll quote above.) Isaiah says that every advancement in human learning, every work of art, etc. etc. is just God “opening his book of creation, revealing his truth, and teaching us.” Of course, the vast majority of farmers in the history of the world did not know that God was doing this, but Isaiah says that was what was happening. It is “general revelation” or *common grace*.

All terrific music, skillful farming, new advances in the ability to travel by air, and great political leadership—all of these things are expressions of God's grace. See—

- James 1:17 says that “every good and perfect gift comes down from above...from the father of lights.” This means that every act of goodness, wisdom, justice, and beauty—no matter who does it—is being enabled by God. It is a gift, and therefore some form of grace.
- In Exodus 31:1ff. we read how Bezalel was “filled with the Spirit of God, with skill, ability, and knowledge in all kinds of crafts—to make artistic designs...” Here we see artistic skill is something that comes from God. (As per James 1:17—it would have to!) Salieri (in the play and movie) was

⁴ Mouw, p.14

⁵ Frances Hutcheson, 18th century moral philosopher, used a famous illustration to demonstrate this. He asks us to imagine that we hear of a man who discovers buried treasure in his backyard—worth millions. But then you hear that he gives it all away to the poor. Even if you would never do so yourself, and even if you swagger publicly that such an act is stupid, you cannot help but admire what was done. There is an indelible sense of the moral beauty of the action.

⁶ Alec Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (IVP, 1993) p. 235.



right—Mozart’s music was the voice of God, regardless of the moral and spiritual condition of Mozart’s heart.

- In Isaiah 45:1 we read of Cyrus, a pagan king that God anoints with his Spirit and chooses for world leadership! On the other hand, in Genesis 20:6ff we read how God prevents another pagan king from falling into sin. This is an indication of how God’s Spirit does not just function as a non-saving *ennobling* force in the world, but also as a non-saving *restraining* force in the world. This is not the 7 Spirit working as a *converting* or a *sanctifying* agent. Rather he acts to give wisdom, courage, insight, and to restrain the effects of sin.

However, a more balanced answer to Mouw’s question is “yes—but...”

In Romans 1:18, Paul says that we “hold the truth down in unrighteousness.” This statement has two edges to it:

John Calvin strikes the balance of the Reformed tradition when first he wrote about secular (he was thinking mainly of ancient pagan) authors:

Let that admirable light of truth shining in them teach us that the mind of man, though fallen and perverted from its wholeness, is nevertheless clothed and ornamented with God’s excellent gifts. If we regard the Spirit of God as the sole fountain of truth, we shall neither reject the truth itself, nor despise it where it shall appear unless we wish to dishonor the Spirit of God... Those men whom Scripture (1 Cor. 2:14) calls “natural men” were, indeed, sharp and penetrating in their investigation of inferior things. Let us, accordingly, learn by their example how many gifts the Lord left to human nature even after it was despoiled of its true good. (*Institutes, II 2.15*)

On the other hand, he also wrote that while it is true that

...in man’s perverted and degenerate nature some sparks still gleam, [the light is nonetheless] choked with dense ignorance, so that it cannot come forth effectively. [His] mind, because of its dullness...betrays how incapable it is of seeking and finding truth. (*Institutes, II 2:12*)

How could the same person write these two seemingly contradictory things within just a few pages of one another? Are non-believers capable of the truth or not? Yes and no. Calvin is just reading Romans 1 carefully!

On the one hand it means that there is no neutrality in the world. Everyone who does not acknowledge Christ as Lord is operating out of a false view of things. No one is objective. Everyone has to live for something; everyone therefore has to idolize some fallen thing(s) and demonize some good thing(s.) Everyone is operating from a worldview that denies Christ as the center or honors him. There is no such thing as a “view from nowhere.” We must remember this or you make the mistake of simply assimilating too much to the culture.

On the other hand it means that despite the false worldviews, everyone grasps and to some degree acknowledges truths about God, creation, human nature, and so on. Paul says we “hold down the truth in unrighteousness”—which means that we all “have” the truth in some way. How else could we hold it down?

How do we integrate these two sides to the doctrine of common grace?

This universal knowledge of God and of good has been called “first order beliefs.” Romans 1 and 2 tell us that all people do know that there is a glorious creator-God. All people have these beliefs, even if often their conscious, intellectual “second order beliefs” deny him.



This means that much—maybe even most—of what non-Christians will do will point to or honor or be based on basic truths that they know at one level and yet not know at another. For example, Leonard Bernstein’s second order beliefs were secular and naturalistic. But in a famous TV show, he said that “Listening to Beethoven’s Fifth, you get the feeling there’s something right with the world, something that checks throughout, something that follows its own laws consistently, something we can trust, that will never let us down.” What he was saying was that music gave him not simply good feelings, but *meaning*. Despite the fact that his formal beliefs were that life was a cosmic accident, and therefore there could be no meaning to anything or hope—music made him feel that there *was* meaning to it all, that it *did* matter how you live! Some things really matter.

Without an understanding of this, the world is a pretty confusing place! In the play and movie *Amadeus*, Salieri is totally confused and bitter that he, a morally good person, has so little talent, while Mozart (in the movie, a morally despicable person) has very obviously received a major gift from God in his soaring talent. Salieri’s problem was (at least) a failure to understand the doctrine of common grace. God gives out good gifts of wisdom, talent, beauty, or skill graciously—that is, in a completely unmerited way. He casts them across the human race like seed, in order to enrich, brighten, and preserve the world. By rights, sin should be making life on earth here much more unbearable than it is. One of the main reasons it is not is because of common grace.

Without an understanding of this, Christians will think they can live self-sufficiently. We might feel like we should only go to Christian doctors, work with Christian lawyers, listen only to Christian counselors, buy only Christian artists. Of course, we remember the balance of this doctrine! Every nonbeliever has serious blindness and is operating out of a false worldview. There is no neutrality. But the fact remains that many of the gifts God has put in the world *for us believers as well as the rest of the human race* are out there in non-Christians! Mozart was a gift to us—whether he was a believer or not (James 1:17). “He makes the rain to fall and the sun to shine on the just and the unjust” (Matt. 5:45).

Without an understanding of this, Christians may feel no need to study the world and other human cultures in order to get to know God. But we need to appreciate truth and wisdom wherever we find it.

Without an understanding of this, Christians will have trouble understanding why non-Christians so often exceed Christians morally and in wisdom. A doctrine of sin means that believers are never as good as our right worldview should make us. A doctrine of grace means that nonbelievers are never as messed up as their false worldview should make them. The differences between believers and nonbelievers across the board is often not striking. One of the reasons is of course “sin”—but the other reason is grace!

V. Case study: Popular culture (a very brief look)⁷

In general, Christians’ reaction to popular culture has been some form of disengagement. Music, movies, and television are sweepingly evaluated as dangerous, polluting, and/or degrading. The withdrawal has taken different forms. One form is complete withdrawal. Another form is the creation of a subculture filled with sanitized, overtly evangelistic forms of music, movies, TV shows, etc. A third form of disengagement is uncritical consumption of popular culture (simply imbibing it without any sifting of world-view analysis.)

Why this disengagement? One is a legalistic or “thin” view of sin (treated above as “dualism”). A theologically thin view of sin sees it as a series of discrete acts of non-compliance to God’s regulations. Christian growth is seen mainly as seeking environments where you are less likely to do these sinful actions. Sin is something that can be essentially removed from the person. (This view of sin comports with a lack of understanding of the thoroughness and richness of Christ’s gracious work for us. If we have to earn our salvation, we need a view of sin that is easier to deal with by conscious effort.)

⁷ This case study is heavily based on Ted Turnau, “Reflecting Theologically on Popular Culture as Meaningful”, in *Calvin Theological Journal* 37 (2002) pp. 270-296. We will not go into the differences between popular culture and so-called ‘high’ culture that Turnau explores.



But a theologically “thick” view of sin sees it as a compulsive drive of the heart to produce or discover idols. “Not a single person has ever been found who did not fashion for himself an idol or specter in the place of God. Surely, just as waters boil up from a vast, full spring, so does an immense crowd of gods flow forth from the human mind...”⁸ If we have a thin view of sin, we will remove from our view anything that could tempt us to do overt actions of sexual immorality, profanity, violence. By withdrawing such cultural texts from our view we may feel less sinful, but that is not the case. The complex organic nature of our sin will still be at work making idols out of things that are not overt forms of law-breaking—like our moral goodness, or financial security, or our family, or doctrinal purity, or pride in our own traditional culture, and so on. In fact, too much emphasis on withdrawal makes the likelihood of slipping into respectable idolatries greater.

If, instead, we have the thick view of sin—as idolatry that pervades all we do—this should lead not to withdrawal or to uncritical consumption, but rather to humble, critical *engagement*. We should identify idolatries in popular culture as ways of repenting for the seeds of the same in our own hearts and avoiding them.

Another cause of disengagement is an intellectualistic or thin view of common grace. As we noted above, Christians have long recognized that all people have some knowledge of God that they suppress, according to Romans 1-2. But many conceive of this knowledge mainly (or strictly) as cognitive information that can be retrieved somehow as we argue with people about the existence of God, the truth of Christianity, and so on. In other words, innate knowledge of God is thought of in intellectualistic terms.

But the language of Romans 1:18-25 gives us a much more comprehensive and dynamic picture of how general revelation or common grace works in lives. The “truth” is being “suppressed” (v.18), but it continues to bear down on us. The NIV translation of verse 20 says: “Since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities...have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so men are without excuse.” But the verbs *nosumena* (“are being understood”) and *kathopatai* (“are being seen”) are in the form of *present* passive participles. That is, the reality of God’s nature and our obligations to him are continuously present to us. It should not be thought of as static, innate ideas or information, but as a continually fresh, insistent pressure on the consciousness of every human being. In short, every artifact of human culture is a response to God’s general revelation (cf. Isaiah 28 above) but always marred by an idolatrous heart that doesn’t want to acknowledge the total sovereignty of God (Rom. 1:21). So all cultural production is a dialogue between God’s general revelational grace and the idolatrous nature of the human heart. “Loss of faith in a given religion does not by any means imply the eradication of the religious instinct. It merely means that the instinct, temporarily repressed, will seek an object elsewhere.”⁹

In short, every human being producing culture (and everyone is!) is in a deep dialogue with the general revelation of God. Therefore human culture is an extremely complex mixture of brilliant truth, marred half-truths, and overt resistance to the truth. Here is an interesting example of this dialogue:

One of the movies we have shown students is the Vietnamese/American co-production *Three Seasons*, a collection of four intertwining vignettes. One story has to do with a cyclo (sort of a cross between a bicycle and a rickshaw) driver named Hai and his infatuation with an ambitious prostitute, a young woman who is sure she can sleep her way out of poverty into the cool, clean world of the luxury hotels near where she works. After winning some money in a cyclo race, he pays \$50 to spend the night with her. He rents a room in the luxury hotel and the scene leads you to expect a typical, erotic love scene. Against the viewer expectations, though, he does not have sex with her. Instead he simply requests to watch her fall asleep, to watch her rest in the world she dreams of joining. Slowly, comfortably, she falls asleep. And he is gone in the morning, having demanded nothing from her

⁸ Calvin Institutes Book 1, V, 12

⁹ R. C. Zaehner, Oxford University, 1959. Quoted as the epigraph in Turner, *Hungry for Heaven*.



except the chance to fulfill her desire to belong. Something snaps in the prostitute, and she finds she cannot return to her old job. [There is some similarity here to how the grace of the bishop transforms Valjean into an honest man in *Les Miserables*.] It is a powerful scene, a completely unexpected glimpse of fragile beauty and self-less, life-changing love. To my knowledge, director/screenwriter Tony Bui is not a Christian, and perhaps has never even heard the gospel...But moments of beauty and truth [and incredibly poignant images of Christ's saving work] are evidence of the work of God who preserves the noble, creative image of himself in us despite the distorting effects of sin.¹⁰

Let's get an overview of, then, the different ways we can approach popular culture, according to our World-and-Life view.

One widespread approach to popular culture is to look at it with rejection and deep suspicion. Over the past decades, the dominant view in cultural studies has been marked by a deep bias against any real *meaning* in culture. That is, any notion of a deeper meaning (what life is all about, what is good, what is evil) in culture is an illusion. Culture is really just about competing power groups within society that appropriate symbolic resources in order to represent their group or movement and gain leverage over others.

Because this has been the dominant view in the academic world for a good while, this view has filtered down so that it dominates the way (for example) movie critics review films. Each weekend the pages of the *New York Times* arts section will tell us that "Buffy the Vampire Slayer" is not really about good and evil but about female power, while "Lord of the Rings" is not really about good and evil but about male power. (We will look in future installments of this subject of the problem with this and other non-Christian worldviews.)

A second widespread approach to popular culture is to look at it *dualistically*. As we noted above, the average Christian, with "thin" views of sin and common grace tends to divide life into the "sacred" and the "profane." This dualism leads to two very different (but inadequate) responses to culture. Some dualistic Christians *withdraw* from popular human culture and insist that we create our own overtly Christian music, cinema, literature, and so on. We talked about this approach above.

Other dualistic Christians *uncritically consume* popular human culture. They think of their "Christian walk" as what they do on Sunday. The rest of the week they have no ability to think worldviewishly about what they are imbibing. The idolatrous aspects of popular culture—the tremendous emphasis on appearance, on sexuality, on material prosperity, on absolute individual freedom, etc, etc—are not viewed critically. The sources of the various powerful images are not recognized as idolatrous and so the heart is shaped by them. This happens at a deep level. For example, if you totally hate yourself because you are mildly overweight, it is because you have let the idolatrous images of popular culture gain a foothold in your heart.

A third approach to popular culture is to look at it *Christian world-viewishly*. We should be willing to be very engaged with general human culture produced by non-Christians. Why?

First, a "thick" view of sin means that even overtly Christian-produced culture will *always have some idolatrous discourse within it*. When we become Christians we continue to have powerful amounts of remaining sin in us. We continually struggle with remaining idolatrous impulses. Our Christian-produced culture will not be free from these.

Second, a "thick" view of grace means that even overtly non-Christian-produced culture will *always have some witness to God's truth in it*. Even the angry, overtly anti-God culture is to a degree a testimony to God's reality. Many of these have an air of desperation about them. They are vainly trying to deny what they know in their hearts.

¹⁰ Turnau, p. 279.



In short, Christians are never as good as their right beliefs should make them and non-Christians are never as bad as their wrong beliefs should make them.

In general, then, this means a stance of *critical enjoyment* of human culture. On the one hand it means to recognize the half-truths and to resist the idols. How do we do this? It means when you recognize a cultural artifact that is a blatant, overt (even angry) resistance to God's general revelation, there is no need to delve deeply into it or expose yourself to it repeatedly. On the other hand it means to recognize and celebrate the widespread expressions of justice, wisdom, truth, and beauty in culture.

VI. Conclusion

In short, each one of us, as part and parcel of the broader culture, is engaged in the process of contributing to it in some way. As Christians, engaged in the culture but armed with a healthy biblical understanding of sin, we can understand that even Christian-produced cultural contributions will always contain idolatrous strains, since Christians continue to struggle with idolatrous impulses. Likewise, secular-produced cultural contributions will always contain some witness to God's truth. Even the angry, overtly anti-God productions, with their air of desperation, can testify to God's reality.

In general, then, this means we should adopt a stance of critical enjoyment of culture. We recognize the implicit worldviews underlying what we observe in the culture. Yet we simultaneously recognize the idols inherent in our own worldview. And we allow the gospel, as N. T. Wright says, to inform our cultural contributions:

The gospel of Jesus points us and indeed urges us to be at the leading edge of the whole culture, articulating in story and music and art and philosophy and education and poetry and politics and theology a worldview that will mount the historically rooted Christian challenge to both modernity and postmodernity, leading the way into the post-postmodern world with joy and humor and gentleness and good judgment and true wisdom.¹¹

¹¹ N. T. Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus: Rediscovering Who Jesus Was and Is* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1999).