

ANDY CROUCH



# CULTURE MAKING

RECOVERING OUR CREATIVE CALLING



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## TEARDOWNS, TECHNOLOGY AND CHANGE



**C**ulture changes, and the evidence is in this sentence—in the spelling.

Until the Renaissance, there were no “silent *es*” in the English language. In fact, there were hardly any silent letters at all—people wrote down what they spoke, sound by sound (and until the rise of the dictionary, their spellynges often did not agree). They wrote the *e* at the end of words like, well, *like*, because they heard an *e*, not because their second grade teacher told them to. Somewhere along the way pronunciation changed, but spelling did not. And because the English people traded with, conquered and were conquered by a host of other peoples, the English language acquired words, and unpredictable spellings, from all their languages as well, a process that has only accelerated in the era of cheap and frequent worldwide travel. It’s not only *es* that are silent—every letter in English can be silent except *j* and *v*. Even for those two letters, to the chagrin of second-graders everywhere, it’s probably only a matter of time.

The difference between the way we spell and the way we talk gives us a glimpse into cultural change. Our language is the result of centuries of adaptation, accommodation and assimilation. Embedded in the words we speak and the way we write is a history that includes Viking raiders

despoiling coastal villages, French armies advancing over England, British colonizers co-opting Indian maharajahs, Arab traders making their way along the spice routes, slave traders crossing the Atlantic with ships packed with human cargo, and Celtic missionaries walking and praying their way through pagan northern England. Even further back are Phoenicians setting out on the Mediterranean and nomadic peoples spreading out from the Indus River valley.

And within these grand and often terrible movements of history there is the complex history of language and writing itself—the tales told around fires in the old north of England that a bard wrote down in the epic poem we call *Beowulf*, the plays performed by the sometimes-starving artists of the Lord Chamberlain's Men, the edict of King James that set dozens of scholars to producing a translation of the Bible into English, the clipped cadences of a woman in Amherst, Massachusetts, dressed in white, the thundering voice of an African American preacher on the Washington Mall in 1963. Even if we do not know their names or what they said, they still shape the way we speak and what we listen for. We live in their world—the world made of what they made.

## FROM LANGUAGE TO LASERS

Language changes slowly, and for much of human history that was true of nearly all forms of culture. But the last few centuries have brought change of a much speedier sort. In 1951 a scientist named Charles Townes was sitting on a park bench in Washington, D.C., when he suddenly had an idea for a device he would come to call “microwave amplification by stimulated emission of radiation,” or, for short, a maser. Within two years he and his colleagues had built a working model.

There was no obvious use for a maser. But Townes and his group kept experimenting. By 1958 they had begun to lay the theoretical groundwork for an “optical maser” that would emit visible light rather than microwaves. In 1960, another research group in California built the first laser. In 1964, Townes and several other researchers shared the Nobel Prize for physics for their discovery. One of the most consequential inventions of the twentieth century had gone from obscurity to celebrity in the space of a decade.

Any piece of technology, like all culture, has countless unpredictable effects, but lasers rank with transistors and integrated circuits as one of the most startlingly versatile and mutable inventions of our time. Townes and his colleagues could never have foreseen all the uses to which lasers were put in the next few decades. They are in living rooms (powering DVD players), in surgical suites (performing delicate cosmetic procedures and correcting nearsightedness), under oceans (transmitting terabits of data per second from one continent to another), in offices (in printers and color copiers) and in supermarkets (scanning bar codes, another amazingly versatile invention, with its own countless knock-on effects, that would not be possible without lasers). In 1960 there were a handful of lasers in the entire world; now the chances are that as you read this book, you are no more than fifty feet from one.

### **THE TROUBLE WITH PROGRESS**

The English language has changed little enough in four hundred years that we can read Shakespeare without too much effort; in forty years, devices like the laser have become ubiquitous and all but essential to our culture. But the difference between language and lasers is not just a matter of the speed with which they change. We find it natural to speak of lasers as an “advance” over masers—because they use a wider spectrum of light than masers were able to harness—just as the tiny low-powered lasers that make LASIK treatments and DVDs possible are an “advance” over the unwieldy lab-bench lasers of the 1960s. Not only does technological knowledge clearly build on previous scientific and engineering achievements, the results for human beings, whether measured in the acuity of our eyesight or the vividness of our home movies, seem clearly to have improved.

Americans love improvement. Whether in the can-do spirit of American engineers solving a technological problem, American leaders setting out to change history by building democracy in far-off lands, American dieters embracing the latest plan, or American Christians dreaming of cultural renewal, we tell ourselves stories of progress.

But the language of improvement can be dangerous and misleading when applied to many of the most important features of culture. Lan-

guage, like lasers, changes. Yet is twenty-first-century American English an *improvement* over the Anglo-Saxon of *Beowulf*? This is not an easy question to answer. Human languages, as they develop, do not seem to become either more complex or more simple—or, strangely enough, they seem to become both. The language of *Beowulf* includes grammatical “cases,” different endings signaling a word’s function in the sentence, that have all but disappeared from modern English. So English has become simpler. On the other hand, the number of words in modern English vastly outnumbers the vocabulary of *Beowulf*’s first hearers. In this sense English has become more complex. As far back as historical linguists can peer into the processes of change that gave us our modern languages, there is no clear pattern of either progress or decay. Long-lost languages were no more or less complex than our own. As far as linguists can tell, language is always changing—but it never “improves.”

What is true for language is true for many cultural goods that rely on it. Is *The Great Gatsby* an improvement over *Beowulf*? Is *The Waste Land* an improvement over Dante’s *Divine Comedy*? These questions are not only difficult to answer, they strike us as very possibly absurd. Indeed, one of the simplest ways to distinguish between the subjects we call the “sciences” and the subjects we call the “humanities” is that the humanities deal with topics where there is no unambiguous measure of improvement. Charles Townes’s Nobel Prize–winning paper of 1958 describing the laser is no longer read by working scientists—it has long since been superseded. But serious students of literature still read *The Waste Land*, *Beowulf* and Homer because, while the stories told by the great writers and poets may change, they never improve.

A few years ago we moved into a house that had just been thoroughly renovated by a contractor named Ken Crowther. It had been neglected, inside and out, for many years, to the point of being the subject of at least one admonishing letter in the local weekly paper. Its owners, grown old and infirm, had ceased to make something of their cultural world—and more to the point, were sufficiently cut off from kin and community that there was no one to come alongside them and take up the cultural work they were no longer able to carry out.

Ken tore out the weeds in the front yard and planted flowering shrubs.

Inside, he restored the worn, wooden floors, tore down a few walls and resurfaced the rest, installed new cabinets and tile in the kitchen. He applied fresh paint inside and out. We have been fending off compliments from grateful passersby, who think we did the work ourselves, ever since.

Is our home an improvement over the tired building on a weed-infested lot that stood here just a few years ago? Yes. But is it an improvement over the solid, modest house that was built on this site in the 1940s? I'm not so sure. In certain technological senses, it is. Its kitchen counters are granite instead of Formica, which is an unmixed blessing when I am making bread or chopping parsley. Its windows are more energy-efficient—though that efficiency is more than offset by the addition of central air conditioning. But in the broader sense, in its function of being a home, a building that makes something of the corner lot on which it sits, a structure that participates in the cultural world of our small town, I don't see that it represents progress. Our home has changed dramatically over its sixty years of existence, but the most important changes have not so much improved it as maintained it—which is to say, kept it faithful to its possibilities, made the most of its opportunities and minimized its limitations.

If progress is not the right word for buildings or poems, what is the right way to evaluate cultural change? I suggest *integrity*. We can speak of progress when a certain arena of culture is more whole, more faithful to the world of which it is making something. That world includes the previous instances of culture created by generations before us. Progress in a house, as Stewart Brand suggests in his rich study of cultural change, *How Buildings Learn*, really means effectively adapting a building to the requirements of its surroundings and the needs of its occupants. Our house is a lovely and valuable home because it has been lived in—it has settled into the landscape and surrounding neighborhood in subtle ways—and it has been restored with an eye to making the most of its history and its possibilities.

Sometimes the cycle of culture making breaks down. Buildings are allowed to fall into such disrepair that they must be razed to the ground rather than lovingly maintained and improved. Or owners demolish even well-maintained homes in search of the maximum square footage per acre—the phenomenon of “teardowns” that has arrived in many high-

priced suburban communities. The teardown may represent a kind of progress: the new house is superior in nearly every technological way to the building it replaced. But it also represents a kind of cultural failure—the failure to make something of the world that was given to the owners of that piece of property. Such failure is sometimes inevitable—the world we must make something of includes, for better or worse, the economic realities of the real estate markets and the construction business, the unwise and slipshod architectural choices of previous generations, and laws governing land use that impose relatively stiff taxes on small buildings. But while responsibility for the cultural failure of a teardown may be shared by many parties, it is a failure still.

Even cultural change that seems unambiguously positive is often more complicated. In industrial England, children as young as six were sent to work in the mines. The passage of laws barring child labor strikes us as clear cultural progress. But in fact there was child labor in England long before industrialization. In an agricultural world children worked alongside their parents from an early age. Such an arrangement was not necessarily exploitative—a fact recognized even today by the exceptions child labor laws make for farm families.

It was only with the rise of industrialization—hailed as the clearest sort of “progress” at the time—that the conditions emerged within which children’s labor, previously acceptable, became a distortion of human life and dignity. The “progress” of child labor laws simply restored a kind of equity and safety to childhood that the “progress” of industrialization had undone.

A world where children do not have to toil in dangerous conditions far from their parents is clearly an improvement over one where mine owners treat children as dispensable units of labor. But what about a world where children never get to participate in the economy of the family, never see their parents at work and are never given responsibility for cultivating the earth? Is that really an improvement over the world where families shared responsibility for their corner of the created world, where boys and girls learned skills alongside their fathers and mothers, and where culture was created largely by the communal effort of families rather than commercial enterprises? At one scale, we see clear progress; at another, larger scale we realize that while much has been gained, something real has been lost.

## RATES OF CHANGE

Culture is constantly changing, and different kinds of culture change at different rates. In *How Buildings Learn*, Brand observes that every building consists of six layers. From the inside out, he labels them Stuff, Space Plan, Services, Skin, Structure and Site. Each layer changes at its own rate. The stuff in a home—the furniture and fixtures—may change in just a few years. The space plan—the arrangement of interior walls, the placement of doors—may change once a decade or so; the services—electricity, water, heat, waste disposal—may need replacing every twenty years. At the other end of the spectrum, the site, the physical land and legally defined property on which the building sits, bounded by streets and other properties, may not change for hundreds of years.

In *The Clock of the Long Now*, Brand applies the same model to culture as a whole, dividing it into Fashion, Commerce, Infrastructure and Governance. These layers “[work] down from fast and attention-getting to slow and powerful. Note that as people get older, their interests tend to migrate to the slower parts of the continuum. . . . Adolescents are obsessed by fashion, elders bored by it.” We could argue with Brand’s four layers. Where do omelets fit in his scheme? How about lasers? How about language? But the core insight is crucial. Some aspects of culture change rapidly—at the level of fashion, where hemlines or sideburns go up and down, they change chaotically and cyclically, with no real long-term trend at all. Woe to the cultural observer or would-be culture maker who ascribes great importance to this year’s preference for tucked or untucked shirts. Fashion rarely changes in any particular direction from year to year; it simply comes and goes.

Brand’s most important insight is that there is an inverse relationship between a cultural layer’s *speed of change* and its *longevity of impact*. The faster a given layer of culture changes, the less long-term effect it has on the horizons of possibility and impossibility. My life as an American citizen is profoundly shaped by centuries of development in our political system, especially the ideals of governance ratified by the Constitutional Convention in 1787 and shaped by countless legislative and judicial decisions since. But my life is not at all affected by the fashions for men’s wigs in 1787. By the same token, any change that will profoundly move the

horizons of possibility and impossibility will almost always, by definition, take lots of time. The bigger the change we hope for, the longer we must be willing to invest, work and wait for it.

What about revolutions—sudden changes at the level of governance and other large-scale, long-term structures of culture? Or what about revivals—the sudden, precipitous, spiritually motivated turning points in culture that many Christians pray for, sometimes as their sole hope for change in the culture? There can be no doubt that we can point to moments in history when cultural change accelerated or changed course. What about the Constitutional Convention of 1787, the battle of Waterloo, or the New York City “businessmen’s revivals” that dramatically increased support for the abolitionist cause?

These moments tend to be foreshortened by hindsight. They appear to us as moments, but to those who lived through them they often were lengthy, unpredictable series of smaller events. The Constitutional Convention debated for months, with many moments of tedium, many blind alleys and many revisions, before they produced the document that has so shaped American governance. Furthermore, that Convention could not have come to its conclusions without two hundred years of writing, mostly in England, about political philosophy.

Even aside from the development of technological devices like lasers, some culture-changing events do seem to happen in the blink of an eye. In the course of a few hours on the morning of September 11, 2001, nineteen men radically changed the culture of the United States. But even such nearly instantaneous events are not as instantaneous as they seem. They are like earthquakes, which seem to happen suddenly, without warning. But we know that earthquakes are only the climactic events of a process that has taken years, sometimes decades, centuries or millennia, of accumulated stresses deep under the earth. From the point of view of many Americans, September 11 was a revolution, but for the terrorists themselves that was just one day in a much longer process with a history stretching back at least to the Crusades and a future extending to a far-off but devoutly hoped for culmination of a worldwide caliphate, and indeed an envisioned afterlife of heavenly rewards for their martyrdom. Nothing that matters, no matter how sudden, does not have a long history and take part in a long future.

And like earthquakes, revolutions are much better at destroying than building. There is an important asymmetry here, whose roots go all the way down to the laws of physics: It is possible to change things quickly *for the worse*. It only took two hours after the collision between a 767 and the South Tower of the World Trade Center to destroy it. But no one can build the World Trade Center in two hours. The only thing you can do with Rome in a day is burn it.

The revolutionaries—and terrorists—of the world put their hope in cataclysmic events. But even they are likely to be disappointed by the long-term effects of their actions. After the 2005 bombings in the London Underground, the *Economist* observed, “No city . . . can stop terrorists altogether. What can be said, though, is that terrorists are unable to stop cities, either.” The attacks of September 11, 2001, undoubtedly set in motion huge, and very likely tragic, changes. But they did not change as much as all of us who witnessed them thought they would. At the largest scale of culture, even horrific revolutionary events cannot easily destroy. All the more so, the most beneficial events possible have little positive effect in the short run.

### THE INVISIBLE RESURRECTION

As Christians tell the story, the three days encompassing the condemnation, crucifixion, burial and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth were the most extraordinary sequence of events in human history—events accompanied by physical earthquakes, splitting the temple veil and opening tombs, which mirrored the historical and spiritual drama of that divine intervention.

In chapter eight we will look in more depth at the cultural implications of Jesus’ resurrection. As we will see, believers and nonbelievers alike can agree that whatever happened that early Sunday morning was the most culturally significant event in history. Surely here is evidence that the best hope for dramatic cultural change is in singular acts of divine intervention?

And yet the cultural implications of Jesus’ resurrection, one day or one week after the event, were exactly nil. The following Sunday, according to the Gospels, the witnesses to that earth-shattering event were hidden in

an obscure corner of Jerusalem in fear for their lives. The event that would do more than any other in history to alter the horizons of possibility and impossibility had not yet had the slightest effect on the life of a typical resident of Jerusalem. Arguably, it had not even had much effect on the few who had seen evidence of the event with their own eyes.

A few decades later there was a burgeoning movement of witnesses to the resurrection and those who believed their testimony. But their cultural impact was still minimal, meriting only the most cursory references in the correspondence of Roman officials and the annals of contemporary historians. It was not until several hundred years had passed that the Christian movement, with the assistance of a possibly converted and certainly savvy emperor named Constantine, began to shape the horizons of the Roman Empire. Even the resurrection of Jesus, the most extraordinary intervention of God in history, took hundreds of years to have widespread cultural effects.

So hope in a future revolution, or revival, to solve the problems of our contemporary culture is usually misplaced. And such a hope makes us especially vulnerable to fashion, mistaking shifts in the wind for changes in the climate. Fads sweep across the cultural landscape and believers invest outsized portions of energy and commitment in furthering the fad, mistaking it for real change. The mass media, which are largely driven by fashion, can amplify the effect of a fad—for a few weeks, everyone is humming the number one song, the band is on *Saturday Night Live* and talking with Leno, the video is in heavy rotation. If the song or the band has Christian affinities, websites will spring up overnight celebrating a new victory for the gospel in the culture. The short-term effects may be startling. But the long-term effects are negligible.

When we celebrate the arrival of the new Christian band, we are treating them as a technological device—the cultural equivalent of a laser that will in a few short years reshape the culture in significant ways. Strangely, we rarely fail to be surprised when the device fails to deliver at the scale that we had hoped. Culture watchers sometimes talk about the “silver bullet” theory of Christian influence—the dream that someday, someone will write “the perfect song” that will, in four minutes of pure inspiration, bring about a wave of repentance and conversion in our land. This is treat-

ing a song like a device. It is turning music into technology. Christians are not the only ones who cherish this fantasy—advertisers of all sorts have mastered the art of transmuting music and art into the technology of persuasion. In fact, it might not be too much to say that the four-minute pop song is itself a device, a technologically massaged tool for the delivery of pleasing or cathartic emotions.

The record of technology as science—relieving human beings of specific burdens and diseases—is splendid. The record of technology as a metaphor for being human is disastrous. When technology is used to win wars, it becomes the atomic bomb. When it is used to control human sexuality, it becomes the destruction of millions of unborn lives and, in contraception, all too often fosters the disengagement of fruitfulness from love. The biggest cultural mistake we can indulge in is to yearn for technological “solutions” to our deepest cultural “problems.”

### **CULTURE IS MORE THAN WORLDVIEW**

By now we should be completely cured of talking about “the culture.” Not only does this shorthand way of speaking gloss over culture’s many *spheres*; not only does it ignore the difference between culture’s different *scales*; not only does it pass too quickly over *ethnic diversity*; we can now add to the lengthy list of charges against this beguiling abstraction that it is far too static a way of talking about a phenomenon that is always changing. The only meaningful use of the phrase “the culture” is embedded in a longer phrase: the culture of a particular sphere, at a particular scale, for a particular people or public (ethnicity), at a particular time. And even this much more careful way of speaking needs to always be accompanied by the awareness that the culture we are describing is changing, perhaps slowly, perhaps quickly.

But there is one more easy abstraction we need to clear up in order to appreciate how culture changes. To define culture as *what human beings make of the world* is to make clear that culture is much more than a “worldview.”

The language of worldview has become widespread among Christians in the past few years as a way for understanding both their own faith and the surrounding culture. There are “worldview academies,” “worldview

weekends” and “worldview ministries,” like the one that aims “to equip Christians in understanding and defending the Christian worldview in the public square.” There is even a site that bills itself as “the complete yellow pages of Christian Worldview Sites,” with links to dozens of other “worldview resources.”

One of the best expositions of the importance of worldview, Brian J. Walsh and J. Richard Middleton’s *The Transforming Vision*, defines worldview this way:

World views are perceptual frameworks. They are ways of seeing. . . . Our world view determines our values. It helps us interpret the world around us. It sorts out what is important from what is not, what is of highest value from what is least. A world view, then, provides a model *of the world* which guides its adherents *in the world*.

A worldview, Middleton and Walsh say, comprises a culture’s answer to four crucial questions: *Who are we? Where are we? What’s wrong? What’s the remedy?*

Walsh and Middleton engagingly present the Christian answers to these questions. And those answers are intended to be, as the title puts it, a transforming vision. As the back cover of the book says, Walsh and Middleton “long to see Christianity penetrate the structures of society, reforming and remolding our culture. From scholarship in the universities to politics, business and family life, the Christian vision can transform our world.”

Yet as Nicholas Wolterstorff observes in his foreword to Walsh and Middleton’s book, the world seems strangely unaffected by the “transforming vision”:

Why doesn’t it actually work this way? Why does the Christian world view remain so disembodied in spite of the fact that so many in our society count themselves as Christians? The answer that Walsh and Middleton develop is that Christians in general *fail to perceive the radical comprehensiveness of the biblical world view*.

Authors are not responsible either for forewords or for back covers, but I think both Wolterstorff and the anonymous copy writer accurately reflect the thrust of Walsh and Middleton’s book and most of the Christian writ-

ing on “worldview.” The emphasis is on *understanding* worldview. “Why does the Christian world view remain so disembodied?” Wolterstorff asks. His answer is telling—it remains disembodied because it is insufficiently understood, or to use Wolterstorff’s verb, *perceived*. Christianity has not yet reformed and remolded our culture because of a lack of “vision.” But this is a strange turn of thought from Wolterstorff’s acute statement of the core problem, namely that Christianity is “disembodied.” You would think that the solution to disembodiment would be embodiment—the living out in the flesh of the transforming vision. And indeed every Christian proponent of worldview thinking gestures enthusiastically in this direction. But the emphasis always somehow stays on perception and vision, on thinking, on analysis.

One of the leading proponents of worldview, Nancy Pearcey, wrote an ambitious book called *Total Truth*. It is engagingly written and well-sprinkled with anecdotes, but its preoccupation is with demonstrating the radical comprehensiveness of a Christian way of thinking. Indeed, for Pearcey, “worldview” and “worldview thinking” are all but synonymous. “The heart of worldview thinking lies in its practical and personal application,” she writes, but the section of her book on that subject, titled “What Next? Living It Out,” takes up 21 pages out of the book’s 480. On the very last page we find the language of embodiment again, in a quote from theologian Lesslie Newbigin: “The gospel is not to meant to be ‘a disembodied message,’ Newbigin writes. It is meant to be fleshed out in a ‘congregation of men and women who believe it and live by it.’ . . . In one sense,” Pearcey concludes, “this chapter should have been the first.”

Yet embodiment may not flow as naturally from thinking as many books on worldview imply. The cartoonist Sidney Harris’s most famous drawing shows two scientists standing in front of a blackboard covered with a series of equations. In the middle of the equations is written, “Then a miracle occurs.” One scientist says to the other, “I think you need to be more explicit here in step two.”

When we say, “The Christian vision can transform our world,” something similar is happening. Is it really true that simply perceiving the radical comprehensiveness of the Christian worldview would “transform the world”? Or is there a middle step that is being skipped over all too lightly?

Indeed, apply Walsh and Middleton's questions to the worldview enterprise itself. *Who are we?* We are thinkers—academics, writers and readers. *What is wrong?* The problem is an ineffectual, “disembodied” Christianity, one that makes little difference in culture or even, all too often, in the life choices of its adherents. Yet this is subtly rewritten into a fundamentally intellectual problem, that of insufficient attention to or perception of the Christian worldview. *What is the remedy?* The remedy is further explication of, and sometimes defense of, the truth of the Christian worldview.

What is privileged above all in the world of worldview is *analysis*. Worldview is a concept drawn from the world of philosophy, and in the world of philosophy the philosopher is king. Perhaps inevitably, people with strong analytical and philosophical gifts look at the evident problem of Christian disembodiment and propose not a profound program of embodiment but more thinking as the solution. And after we have done a lot *more thinking*, how exactly does the world change? Well, “then a miracle occurs.”

Worldviews are important. They lurk under our first two diagnostic questions—*What does culture assume about the way the world is? What does it assume about the way the world should be?* There is no doubt that underlying beliefs and values play an important part in human choices about what culture to make. Indeed, you could say that the second of our two senses of the phrase *what human beings make of the world*—the sense or meaning we make of the world—is all about worldview in exactly the way that Walsh and Middleton describe it.

But “worldview,” when it means a set of philosophical presuppositions, is too limiting a way of analyzing culture. What is the worldview of an omelet? What is the worldview of the Navajo language? What is the worldview of a chair? The language of worldview is well suited to forms of culture that deal primarily with ideas and imagination—books like this one, poems, plays, paintings. Of all these artifacts we can easily ask what view of the world they presuppose. But it's not so easy or useful to ask that question about omelets or lasers. Omelets do not arise out of a worldview—they create a world.

The danger of reducing culture to worldview is that we may miss the most distinctive thing about culture, which is that *cultural goods have a life*

*of their own.* They reshape the world in unpredictable ways. The interstate highway system was certainly based on a worldview (assumptions about the way the world is and ought to be), and it did have many of the effects that its proponents predicted. But it also had other effects that were equally if not more significant, effects that were unpredicted and unpredictable. The interstate highway system was not just the result of a worldview, it was the source of a new way of viewing the world.

The language of worldview tends to imply, to paraphrase the Catholic writer Richard Rohr, that we can think ourselves into new ways of behaving. But that is not the way culture works. Culture helps us behave ourselves into new ways of thinking. The risk in thinking “worldviewishly” is that we will start to think that the best way to change culture is to analyze it. We will start worldview academies, host worldview seminars, write worldview books. These may have some real value if they help us understand the horizons that our culture shapes, but they cannot substitute for the creation of real cultural goods. And they will subtly tend to produce philosophers rather than plumbers, abstract thinkers instead of artists and artisans. They can create a cultural niche in which “worldview thinkers” are privileged while other kinds of culture makers are shunted aside.

But culture is not changed simply by thinking.

## CULTIVATION AND CREATION



**T**onight I will cook dinner for my family. Over high heat I will sauté onions and green peppers until they begin to caramelize and turn golden brown. I will add coriander and chili powder, mixing up a fragrant and spicy paste, then—when the whole glorious mess is just short of smoking—pour chopped tomatoes into the pot. As steam rises from the rapidly cooling pan, I will deglaze it with a wooden spatula, then add red kidney beans, black beans, corn and bulgur wheat cooked in tomato juice. When the whole mixture has returned to a boil, I will turn down the heat to a barely visible simmering flame. I will have spent less than thirty minutes, a good thing on a busy weeknight in autumn.

Then I will light the candles on our table, the little votive lights and the lantern, and—if I'm in the mood—the six candles in the chandelier overhead. I will set out cloth napkins, plates, glasses and silverware. I will call the family from the corners of the house, we will sit down, and I will bring the pot to the table. We will say our prayer of thanks, adapted from a Jewish blessing that has served God's people for several millennia: "Blessed are you, Lord God, King of the Universe, who gives us this food to eat." And then we will have our chili.

Actually that is not quite right. Because my children do not like chili.

They particularly protest whenever they see a green pepper looming in the bowl, and they don't much care for the tomatoes, even though—as Catherine and I have pointed out to them over and over—they are perfectly happy when those same ingredients are served in spaghetti sauce.

In a few years, when my children are older, they will probably like chili, green peppers and all. But suppose they don't—suppose that this part of our family culture still strikes them as a violation of their taste buds and the Law of Not Combining Green and Red Things. What are their options?

They could protest more and more vociferously until Catherine and I give up on making chili altogether. The problem with this is that Catherine and I love, deeply love, our chili. When autumn comes around each year, we'll be making chili until we are too old to chop the onions. And we are not particularly indulgent parents—what is served for dinner is what's for dinner.

Instead of simply protesting, our children could increase the sophistication of their critique of the chili, explaining in more detail why the green peppers are too sour, why tomatoes are appealing when puréed but appalling when chunky.

Alternatively, our children could just give up, consuming whatever we serve. They might even grow to tolerate, if not like, the green peppers and chunky tomatoes. Or, at the other extreme, when they are old enough they could simply stop coming to dinner altogether. Once they leave the house they will be able to cook their chili any way they want.

For the moment, however, they are stuck—no chili, no dinner until tomorrow night. As far as my children are concerned, our dinner is the only game in town. And none of these strategies is likely to change the menu on a crisp fall night when time is short and we are looking for something hearty and filling to serve.

There is one thing our children could do, though, that could have a decisive effect on our family's culture of the table. If I come home on a Tuesday night a few years from now (when they are old enough that I can trust them with the knives) and find dinner already simmering on the stove, even if it's not chili, I will likely be delighted. Especially if the food being prepared is a substantial improvement on our usual fare, just as tasty

and even more creative than I would have prepared myself.

Consider this a parable of cultural change, illustrating this fundamental rule: *The only way to change culture is to create more of it.* This simple but elusive reality follows from observations we've already made about culture. First, culture is the accumulation of very tangible things—the stuff people make of the world. This is obscured when people talk about culture as something vague and ethereal—such as the common comparison between human beings in culture and fish in water. The fish, we suppose, are completely unaware of the existence of water, let alone all the ways that water both enables and constrains their fishy lives. While it's certainly true that culture can have effects on us that we're not aware of, culture itself is anything but invisible. We hear it, we smell it, we taste it, we touch it, and we see it. Culture presents itself to our five senses—or it is not culture at all. If culture is to change, it will be because some new tangible (or audible or visible or olfactory) thing is presented to a wide enough public that it begins to reshape their world.

Second, as the philosopher Albert Borgmann has observed, human cultures have the strange yet fortunate property of always being full. No culture experiences itself as thin or incomplete. Consider language. No human language seems to its speakers to lack the capacity to describe everything they experience—or, at least, all our languages fail at the same limits of mystery. Even though our languages divide up the color spectrum very differently from one another, for example, every human language has a name for every color its speakers can see. No one is waiting for a new word to come along so they can begin talking about yellow. Consequently, cultural change will only happen when something new displaces, to some extent, existing culture in a very tangible way. Our family eats dinner every night and, if our country's prosperity continues, we will go on eating dinner every night. Our dinner-table culture will only change if someone offers us something sufficiently new and compelling to displace the current items on our menu.

So if we seek to change culture, we will have to create something new, something that will persuade our neighbors to set aside some existing set of cultural goods for our new proposal. And note well that there are a number of other possible strategies, none of which, by themselves, will have any effect on culture at all.

*Condemning culture.* Children turn up their noses at chili for many reasons, most of them childish. But adults can be disgusted by culture too, and often for very good reasons. However, if all we do is condemn culture—especially if we mostly just talk among ourselves, mutually agreeing on how bad things are becoming—we are very unlikely indeed to have any cultural effect, because human nature abhors a cultural vacuum. It is the very rare human being who will give up some set of cultural goods just because someone condemns them. They need something better, or their current set of cultural goods will have to do, as deficient as they may be.

Consider the movie industry. A long economic chain stretches from the writers, directors, actors and producers of movies through the distributors and movie theaters to the customers who show up on a Friday night. There are tremendous incentives at every link of the chain to keep the cycle of production, distribution and consumption going. Suppose we don't like what the local cinema is showing on a given weekend. No matter how much we may protest—condemning the cultural goods on offer—*unless we offer an alternative*, the show will go on.

*Critiquing culture.* What if we are a bit more subtle? We do not simply condemn the movies outright—we analyze them, critiquing them carefully to show how they are inadequate or misguided. Perhaps we even recognize that some movies have certain redeeming qualities, and we expend a great deal of energy tabulating the moments when they succeed. We may produce very sophisticated analyses of the cultural goods around us. And to be sure, if our analysis takes the form of words on paper, voices on a podcast or text on the Internet, the analysis itself is a cultural good. But the depressing truth—especially for those of us who make our living as cultural critics!—is that critique and analysis very rarely change culture at all. For several decades Hollywood's profits have been driven by blockbusters and sequels that are frequently panned by the best-respected critics. No matter how barbed (or beneficent) the reviews, year after year the summer blockbusters break records. The analysis of the critics has only the tiniest effect on what succeeds and fails, swamped by the simple word-of-mouth endorsements of ordinary folks looking for some entertainment on Friday night.

Critics who publish in popular newspapers and websites at least can

hope that tens of thousands of readers will encounter their opinions. Yet the most prolific producers of cultural analysis are found in the world of academia, even though outside the rarefied world of the universities, learned critiques, whether positive or negative, rarely make contact with the culture as a whole. *Within* the cultural world of academia, works of analysis can be significant, making and breaking careers and even starting whole schools of interpretation, but these works are inert if they never leave the ivory tower. The academic fallacy is that once you have understood something—analyzed and critiqued it—you have changed it. But academic libraries are full of brilliant analyses of every facet of human culture that have made no difference at all in the world beyond the stacks.

To be sure, the best critics can change the framework in which creators do their work—setting the standard against which future creations are measured. But such analysis has lasting influence only when someone creates something new in the public realm.

*Copying culture.* Another, rather different approach to unsatisfactory culture is to imitate it, replacing the offensive bits with more palatable ones. A subculture within American society might decide that the best solution to the desultory state of the film industry is to start their own movie industry, complete with producers, directors, writers, actors and even theaters, and create a kind of parallel film industry that will fix the apparent problems in mainstream cinema. The new movies created and distributed by this system would certainly be cultural goods, of a sort. But if they were never shown in mainstream movie theaters—if, indeed, they were created and consumed entirely by members of a particular subculture—they would have no influence on the culture of mainstream movies at all.

Any cultural good, after all, only moves the horizons for the particular public who experience it. For the rest of the world, it is as if that piece of culture, no matter how excellent or significant it might be, never existed. Imitative culture might provide a safe haven from the mainstream—but those who never encountered it would keep going to the movies just as they did before. When we copy culture within our own private enclaves, the culture at large remains unchanged.

*Consuming culture.* Another possible approach, though, is simply to consume culture, perhaps selectively or even strategically. In a consumer soci-

ety the choices of consumers do have undeniable power in shaping what is produced. What if enough consumers decided to vote with their dollars in order to compel Hollywood to produce a different kind of movie?

Among Christians, easily the most controversial movie of 2006 was *The Da Vinci Code*, the film version of Dan Brown's best-selling gnostic detective thriller. Barbara Nicolosi, a screenwriter and Christian leader in Hollywood, wrote a perceptive piece that was published on the widely read website Christianity Today Movies. Nicolosi rejected the idea that *The Da Vinci Code* (the movie or the book) could be constructively "engaged" or seen as a resource for "evangelism." "Is slander an opportunity? Is angry superiority an opportunity? [*The Da Vinci Code*] represents all the 'opportunity' that the Roman persecutions offered the early Church." But she also observed that a boycott, the usual last resort of Christians upset with a cultural product and its producers, simply wouldn't work:

Any publicity is good publicity. Protests not only fuel the box office, they make all Christians look like idiots. And protests and boycotts do nothing to help shape the decisions being made right now about what movies Hollywood will make in the next few years. (Or they convince Hollywood to make more movies that will provoke Christians to protest, which will drive the box office up.)

Some suggest that we simply ignore the movie. But the problem with this option is that the box office is a ballot box. The only people whose votes are counted are those who buy tickets; if you stay home, you have thrown your vote away, and you do nothing to shape the Hollywood decision-making process regarding what movies will make it to the big screen.

Nicolosi offered an ingenious and (as far as I know) unprecedented alternative: an "othercott."

On [*Da Vinci Code's*] opening weekend—May 19-21—you should go to the movies. Just go to another movie. That's your way of casting your vote, the only vote Hollywood recognizes: The power of cold hard cash laid down on a box office window on opening weekend. . . . The major studio movie scheduled for release against [*Da Vinci Code*] is the DreamWorks animated feature *Over the Hedge*. The trailers look fun, and you can take your kids. And your friends. And their friends. In fact, let's all go see it.

Let's rock the box office in a way no one expects—without protests,

without boycotts, without arguments, without rancor. Let's show up at the box office ballot box and cast our votes. And buy some popcorn, too.

There are several things to note about Nicolosi's article. First, her article itself was a cultural good—and a creative one at that. She even coined a new word to describe the new cultural strategy she was proposing. Nicolosi was already far from simply condemning, critiquing or copying culture—she was doing her best to be creative in the face of a real (though also, as it turned out, stultifyingly dull) challenge to faith.

Second, her article, which began as a post on her own blog, "Church of the Masses," had significant success as a cultural good—that is, it was successfully *published*, in the literal sense: brought to the attention of a public who began to make something of it themselves. Not only did Christianity Today Movies pick it up and republish it, a Google search suggests that the word *othercott* was used on 1,860 websites in the weeks after Nicolosi's post first appeared.

But the third observation about Nicolosi's charming suggestion of an "othercott" is a rather deflating one. As a strategy for cultural change, it had almost no chance of success, as becomes clear when we run the numbers. An unauthorized peek into the Web statistics of my employer suggests that Nicolosi's article had somewhere between 30,000 and 40,000 readers during the month of May, and let's suppose that a similar number found her article through links elsewhere on the Web, for a total of 75,000 readers. The usual response rate for any kind of call to action—whether an invitation to click on a link on a page or to send a donation to a cause—is in the very low single-digit percentages, as publishers and politicians know all too well, and of course the numbers go down for a call to spend any significant amount of money and time. But let's be generous and suppose that Nicolosi's call generated an unprecedented response rate of 20 percent. Let's further optimistically suppose that each of those motivated and exceptionally influential readers did indeed bring their kids (2.54 of them, of course) and their friends (2 more) and their friends (2 more) to *Over the Hedge* on opening weekend. That would be a total of 113,100 people who shelled out, let's say, an average of \$8 per ticket, bringing gross revenue of just over \$900,000 to the studios—call

it \$1 million if you throw in some popcorn.

Well, it's not nothing. But the gross receipts of *Over the Hedge* on its opening weekend were \$38.5 million—and the gross receipts of *Da Vinci Code* that same weekend were \$77 million. Eventually *Over the Hedge* went on to gross \$155 million in the United States and *Da Vinci Code* pulled in \$218 million. (An eye-popping number only for someone outside of Hollywood, since that made it only the two-hundredth most successful movie in history.)

In other words, a stunningly enthusiastic response to Nicolosi's call to alternative consumption would have produced an effect of 0.9 percent on the opening weekend performance of the two major feature films (the number goes down to 0.6 percent if you count the top twelve films in wide release that weekend)—and a vanishingly small 0.3 percent on their overall gross. By comparison, good and bad weather (which are bad and good, respectively, for the movie business) are routinely blamed or credited for swings in box office receipts of up to 10 percent. A motivated group of Christian consumers on one of the most hyped weekends in faith-related movie history might have had the impact of a weak low-pressure system in the Upper Midwest.

The reality of life in a globalized culture is that individual consumers, or even large groups of consumers, can only very rarely consume their way into cultural change. Individual consumption decisions are made, as economists say, at the margin, at the edges of the huge effects of aggregated decisions of millions of other purchasers. It should not be too surprising that consumption is an ineffective way to bring cultural change, because consumption is completely dependent on the existence of cultural goods to consume in the first place. The only way to motivate a large enough bloc of consumers to act in a way that really shapes the horizons of possibility and impossibility, in Hollywood or any other massive cultural enterprise, is to create an alternative.

The remarkable fact, however, is that Hollywood is changing—and not because of condemnation, critique, copying or consumption. It is changing because a relatively small group of people—perhaps a few thousand at most, many of them directly or indirectly influenced by Nicolosi's screenwriters training program Act One—have invested their energy, creativity

and money in feature films like *The Passion of the Christ* or Walden Media's *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, both of which easily beat *The Da Vinci Code* at the domestic box office. Of course, there were millions of consumers who made those movies commercial successes—but they did so because someone had created something worth seeing and worth bringing your friends to. Creativity is the only viable source of change.

### THE ART OF CULTIVATION

There is a paradox here, however. Because culture is cumulative—because every cultural good builds on and incorporates elements of culture that have come before—cultural creativity never starts from scratch. Culture is *what we make of the world*—we start not with a blank slate but with all the richly encultured world that previous generations have handed to us.

So when I go to the kitchen to make dinner or when a screenwriter sits down to write a script, the first requirement of us is that we be sufficiently acquainted with our cultural world. To cook well I need to be familiar with the proper use of knives, the qualities of spices, the properties of stainless steel and cast iron pots. I need to understand something about the culinary tradition I am joining—am I making Italian or Chinese or Mexican food? Likewise, a screenwriter needs to understand the way Western visual storytellers approach their craft, ideally reaching back from Aristotle's *Poetics* through the history of the novel to the act structure of the movie *Chinatown*. She also needs to know the minutiae of the software Final Draft, with its universal standard of fifty-four lines per page, and the meaning of the terms *beat* and *POV*. When it comes to cultural creativity, innocence is not a virtue. The more each of us knows about our cultural domain, the more likely we are to create something new and worthwhile.

To be sure, from time to time throughout history would-be culture makers have tried to throw off traditions of culture altogether, declaring revolutions of various sorts. The high modernity of the twentieth century was perhaps the high watermark of culture making that was deliberately cut off from tradition. In his masterful book *Theology, Music, and Time*, Jeremy Begbie writes about the correspondence between two ultramodernist composers of the twentieth century, John Cage and Pierre Boulez. Cage

sought to make music out of natural and random events. His most famous (or infamous) piece, “4' 33”,” calls for a performer to come on stage and sit at the instrument, but to make no sound for a predetermined amount of time. Instead, “music” emerges from the random noise heard when a group of people sit quietly and listen: suppressed coughs, the shifting of bodies in seats, distant traffic, low-humming fans. Yet for all its notoriety at the time, Cage’s “environmental” music is rarely performed. In the long run it will likely be remembered as an historical curiosity—a provocative but fruitless attempt to cut off the cultural tradition of music. And as Cage was well aware, even his nonmusical music requires a host of cultural traditions. “4' 33”” specifically calls for a performer. It presumes an audience gathered in a chamber. A bold attempt to escape the bonds of the culture of music, it does not quite succeed.

Boulez chose a different and opposite direction from Cage. Instead of eliminating musical tones and gestures altogether, he sought to regiment them through the use of mathematical formulas. But as Begbie points out, this experiment was arguably even less successful than Cage’s was. Boulez’s music is nearly unlistenable because it does not yield to the human need for variety and shape to sound, nor to the Western tradition’s way of imparting that variety and shape.

Boulez and Cage each explored the possibility of culture without culture, culture that tried to escape the culture that preceded it. Yet culture has a way of sneaking in even when it is not wanted. The modern painter Jackson Pollock, who tried to completely eradicate the difference between culture and nature, artist and gravity, produced paintings that have an insistent figural quality to them. As abstract expressionist Makoto Fujimura writes of Pollock, when art students try to imitate Pollock’s seemingly grade-schoolish splatters and drips, their work does not begin to compare: Pollock’s work is imbued with a tradition of painting, no matter how insistently the artist tries to overthrow that tradition. It would not be great painting without the tradition in which Pollock was trained and shaped.

All culture making requires a choice, conscious or unconscious, to take our place in a cultural tradition. We cannot make culture without culture. And this means that *creation begins with cultivation*—taking care of the good things that culture has already handed on to us. The first respon-

sibility of culture makers is not to make something new but to become fluent in the cultural tradition to which we are responsible. Before we can be culture makers, we must be culture keepers.

### CULTIVATION AND DISCIPLINE

*Cultivation* is a somewhat less appealing word, I've found, than *creation*. *Creation* appeals to our insatiable modern but also simply human quest for the new and the unexpected. *Cultivation* has the ring of another generation, since postindustrial economies can afford to leave the literal cultivation of fields and gardens to a tiny minority of farmers and gardeners—less than 2 percent of the population in the United States in the twenty-first century are farmers, compared to 38 percent in 1900 and 58 percent in 1860. I am just two generations removed from working farmers, so I have vivid memories of hot summer afternoons with my grandparents on their dairy and cattle farms in Illinois and Georgia. Their work was dusty, dirty, sweaty and unending—starting for my dairy-farming grandfather at 5 a.m. every day most of his life. And year after year, with some variation for weather and seasons, they would do much the same thing. Milking a cow is pretty much the same process in January as in October, in 1935 as in 1975.

At the same time, farmers' work demanded great attention to the soil, plants and creatures in their care, and while it could be quite monotonous it also required sensitivity and attention to the fine changes in condition that could mark the beginning of an illness, the onset of a crop disease or an outbreak of weeds. In fact, our word *husband* seems to come from an Old Norse word for someone who lived on and cultivated the soil—suggesting that the intimacy and responsibility of marriage was once made most clear by comparing it to the life of a farmer.

Cultivation in the world of culture is not so different from cultivation in the world of nature. One who cultivates tries to create the most fertile conditions for good things to survive and thrive. Cultivating also requires weeding—sorting out what does and does not belong, what will bear fruit and what will choke it out. Cultivating natural things requires long and practiced familiarity with plants and their place; cultivating cultural things requires careful attention to the history of our culture and

to the current threats and opportunities that surround it. Cultivation is conservation—ensuring that the world we leave behind, whether natural or cultural, contains as least as many possibilities and at least as much excellence as the one we inherited.

Often, whether the subject is chili for children or cinema for conservative Christians, our first instinct with culture is to figure out how to change it. And yet most human beings, most of the time, spend their lives cultivating—conserving—culture. As cultural animals our first task in life is simply to learn the culture we have been born into—a process that is so complex that adulthood is delayed longer for human beings than any other creature. In the West it is popular to imagine children as innately creative, since they lack the self-censoring self-awareness that plagues grownups. And children certainly do express their creative drive to make something new of the world from an early age. But childhood is much more fundamentally about *imitation* than *creation*. Learning language, learning our culture's vast store of stories and sayings and symbols, learning the meaning of street signs and stop lights, learning the rules of baseball, learning to jump a rope and dribble a basketball—none of these are, strictly speaking, acts of culture making. But they are indispensable acts of culture keeping, and they are necessary if the child is ever to grow up to contribute something to that cultural realm. We can only create where we have learned to cultivate.

The most demanding forms of cultivation are *disciplines*—long apprenticeships in the rudiments of a cultural form, small things done over and over that create new capacities in us over time. Nearly every cultural domain has its own disciplines, and it is intriguing that the domains we often consider the most “creative”—art and music, for example—require some of the most demanding disciplines: day after day of practice in the fundamentals of an instrument or exercises in developing the eye and the hand. Chefs practice their knife work; doctors continually read through medical journals. None of these activities, in themselves, is about culture making; all of them are essential to culture keeping.

It's difficult to think of anything more tedious than listening to a pianist playing scales in the privacy of her studio—and my ten-year-old assures me there is nothing more tedious than having to actually do it. He

looks forward to the day when he will be able to stop playing scales and play “real music”—though I have warned him that the more serious about piano he becomes, the more scales he will play, since professional musicians can work through the rudiments of their instruments for half an hour or more daily. The discipline of playing scales is a prerequisite for forming the facility with the piano that equips a musician to create a new song or perform an old one with creativity and fidelity.

As small and seemingly insignificant as they are, disciplines can have powerful cultural effects. If I make dinner tonight for my family, nothing much will change in my family’s culture. But if I make dinner tonight, tomorrow night, next Tuesday and for the next fifteen years of our children’s lives, seeking to do so with creativity, skill and grace that grows over time—even if I never become an avant-garde chef and always follow the recipe—that discipline alone will indeed create a powerful family culture with horizons of possibility and impossibility that we may not even now be able to glimpse.

So underneath almost every act of culture making we find countless small acts of culture keeping. That is why the good screenwriter has first watched a thousand movies; why the surgeon who pioneers a new technique has first performed a thousand routine surgeries; and why the investor who provides funds to the next startup has first studied a thousand balance sheets. Cultural creativity requires cultural maturity. Someday my own children will undoubtedly cook me a wonderful meal—but by that time, they will also have learned to love chili. With any luck, they will be both culture keepers and culture makers—both cultivators and creators. And then they will be prepared to both conserve culture at its best and change it for the better by offering the world something new.

## GESTURES AND POSTURES



**H**ow have Christians related to the vast and complex enterprise of culture? The answers are as varied as the times and places where Christians have lived. When Christians arrive in a new cultural setting, whether a village in the highlands of Thailand or a Thai fusion restaurant in the East Village, they encounter an already-rich heritage of world making. One of the remarkable things about culture, as we observed in chapter four, is that it is never thin or incomplete. Culture is always full. Human beings need culture too much—language, food, clothing, stories, art, meaning—to endure its absence. So from its first years taking root in Palestine to its astonishing dispersion into nations around the world, Christian faith has always had to contend with well-developed and, usually, stable and satisfying cultural systems.

What have Christians made of the world? Consider the four Gospels of the Bible, each one a cultural product designed to introduce the good news in a culturally relevant way. Matthew begins his Gospel this way: “An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham” (Mt 1:1). His story finds its place in the meaning-making system of Jewish symbolism and textual interpretation. Matthew’s

Jesus correlates closely with major figures of Jewish history—Moses on the mountain, David the King—recapitulating familiar stories and fulfilling long-held expectations. Mark, while just as aware of Jesus' Jewish heritage, seems much more engaged with the cultural heritage of Rome. He begins: "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (Mk 1:1). The Greek word *euangelion*, here translated "good news" but commonly translated "gospel" (making Mark the only Gospel writer to actually call his work a "gospel"), referred to an official proclamation of good news, in particular the Roman practice of sending out heralds to declare victory over Rome's foes. But this *euangelion* is about a very different kind of victory, one that is paradoxically won at the very moment of apparent defeat by Rome itself. Mark's story, in distinction to Matthew's, is not about fulfilled expectations but confounded ones.

Luke, meanwhile, takes on the mantle of a Greek historian, beginning his stately and rhythmic account with the epistolary preface that Greek readers expected, addressing his reader, "most excellent Theophilus" (Lk 1:3). He is careful to note that he has consulted a wide variety of sources and pays close attention, in both his Gospel and its sequel, Acts, to details of medicine, business, politics and geography. John takes up the Jewish philosophical tradition of a thinker like Philo, blending in the first sentence of his Gospel the Hebrew creation story ("In the beginning . . .") with the rarefied vocabulary of Greek metaphysics (" . . . was the *logos*").

And in the end each Gospel writer also adopts a different attitude toward the prevailing culture. Luke is broadly positive toward the righteous Gentiles who were probably his primary audience. He traces the apostle Paul's journey to Rome, the center of the dominant culture, with evident hope that this journey would spread the gospel to the ends of the earth. Matthew, Mark and John each seem less certain that the cultures they engage will be welcome homes for the message they are bringing. The world that "God so loved" in John 3:16 is by John 15:18 the world that "hated me before it hated you." The Jewish tradition that Matthew so reveres is also the source of the Pharisaism that his Jesus excoriates. The *euangelion* of Mark is an upside-down good news, in which the King goes willingly to defeat rather than bravely to victory, overturning the expectations of friend and foe alike.

So already in the four initial, inspired retellings of the story of Jesus, we start to see divergent approaches to culture. We can trace the divergences further still when we look at the two thousand years of the Christian faith in the Western world. In the first four centuries Christians lived in the midst of a powerful dominant culture, the Roman Empire, whose tremendous technological and political achievements belied increasing fragmentation and disintegration. Then, at the time of the Emperor Constantine, came the extraordinary breakthrough in which Christianity became the established religion of the empire. For nearly fifteen hundred years, both in Europe and in the Byzantine Empire to the east, Christianity and culture became synonymous in a way the earliest Christians could never have imagined. But fissures had begun to appear in this tidy fusion of Christianity and culture as early as 1054, when the one holy catholic church divided in two, and the fissures spread at the time of the Reformation, when competing expressions of Christian belief and practice rent the political fabric of Europe.

The Reformation and the Renaissance unleashed tremendous cultural energies. But much of this energy had the side effect, usually unintended, of separating the work of culture from Christian faith itself. The world that post-Reformation Europeans had to make something of was a world that no longer had a single unified belief. They also had to contend with the rise of science, a form of culture making that was more powerful in harnessing the natural world to human ends than anything humanity had ever experienced, and which seemed at times to contradict the stories of Scripture and the theology built upon them. But more profoundly, science seemed to promise that human culture could not just *make something of* but could *entirely dominate* the natural world. There seemed to be less and less need for the humility that came from the theology of a transcendent Creator, and also from the everyday human experience of smallness in the face of nature's overwhelming power.

### **AMERICAN CHRISTIANS AND CULTURE**

At the turn of the twentieth century, when Europe, especially its elites, was well into the long decline of Christian faith that has marked that continent since the Enlightenment, America was just emerging from a period

of exceptional cultural dominance by evangelical Protestant Christians. The religious right's emphasis on the "faith of the founders" has tended to obscure the fact that the golden age of faith in America was not the time of the founding but the era after the Civil War, when a wave of reform movements, institution-building and cultural creativity was energized by self-described evangelical faith. Aside from a few partially secularized bastions of post-Puritan liberalism in New England (plus Cornell, founded in 1865 as the nation's first explicitly nonsectarian university), the veritable deluge of colleges and universities that were founded in the second half of the nineteenth century were led by earnest Christians, or at the very least people who maintained the polite fiction of being such. As with most golden ages, this one's central figures had plenty of clay appendages, and it did not last long.

When the secularizing culture of Europe finally arrived, it recruited American elites with astonishing speed, driven by two intellectual movements in particular: the scientific movement of Darwinism and the theological-historical movement of biblical criticism. Providing the fuel for swift cultural change was the rise of technology, the application of newly rigorous scientific methods to ordinary life. Within less than a generation, institutions that had been securely in the hands of traditional Protestants were transferred to a new breed of Protestants who were much more accommodating of liberal modernity. From Duke in the South to Princeton in the North, to name two bellwether universities, traditional Protestants were ushered from their positions of cultural dominance, and the charters of the institutions were reinterpreted to express their vestigial Christian identity much more broadly and vaguely. The same forces were at work in hospitals, charities, voluntary associations like the YMCA and YWCA, and in individual churches, in a rapid taking of sides that is now remembered as the "fundamentalist-modernist split." On one side were Christians who were eager to embrace modern (and secularized) culture, sure that this culture too would advance the gospel of "the brotherhood of man under the fatherhood of God"; on the other side were Christians more willing to sacrifice cultural legitimacy than the particulars of their faith.

And thus began the cultural exile of the "fundamentalists," named

after a series of pamphlets called *The Fundamentals* but probably made most famous in a stem-winding sermon by the eminent liberal Harry Emerson Fosdick at New York's Riverside Church in 1922: "Shall the Fundamentalists Win?" In Fosdick's lifetime, the fundamentalists certainly did not "win" by any usual measure of cultural influence. The great, grand churches of the mainline denominations—so christened at a time when that word connoted permanence and dominance rather than fading glory—were ceded overwhelmingly to more or less moderate versions of modernism. Indeed, aside from a few outspoken representatives, it is not at all clear that most fundamentalists were interested in "winning." Their understanding of the gospel, reacting in no small part against a "social gospel" that had seemed to sideline many of the traditional concerns of faith, made them more and more suspicious of cultural power. They were disinclined to engage in the sophisticated political maneuvering required to hold on to the large bureaucracies that an earlier generation of evangelicals had so lovingly constructed. By the time Fosdick preached his sermon, it really was all over but the shouting.

For mainline Christians, the chili was just fine. They retained the trappings of cultural power: perches at prestigious universities, beautiful buildings in downtown locations, connections to the wealthy and powerful. The price they paid was to accept that the Christian story would, at a minimum, need to be accommodated to the stories being told by emerging centers of cultural power, the physical sciences and their eager imitators in the newly formed "social sciences." At the time, that price seemed eminently worth paying, and the project of accommodating Christian faith to new cultural developments was exhilarating to a generation of liberal Protestant leaders and churchmen. As a student in a mainline seminary fifteen years ago, I had professors who remembered with awe being present when the theologian Paul Tillich delivered his famous 1948 sermon "You Are Accepted," a masterful reinterpretation of the Christian gospel in an age of privatized psychotherapy.

But the mainline Protestants placed too much confidence in the durability of a particular cultural moment. This was true at the level of ideas, but it was true in more concrete forms of culture as well, like concrete itself. Tremendous assets were invested in church buildings in urban loca-

tions that changed dramatically in the second half of the twentieth century. For several years I attended the Church of All Nations, a United Methodist congregation in downtown Boston that had once had a thriving ministry to European immigrants in Boston's South End. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the Church of All Nations had been a cultural powerhouse in its neighborhood, living out the "social gospel" through myriad social services (including the church ministry that eventually became Goodwill Industries). But its building and its neighborhood stood directly in the path of a master plan for so-called urban renewal: the extension of the Massachusetts Turnpike into downtown Boston. Church members, along with their neighbors, fought the Turnpike extension, but the logic of the freeway was irresistible. The lovely Gothic church building was razed to the ground, and the congregation was given a reasonable sum in compensation.

It was then that the church made a quintessentially mainline, and utterly doomed, cultural choice. The church's leaders retained an architectural firm that designed an ultramodern building, a pure two-story cylinder of dull brick, without a single window, set in the midst of a bricked-over plaza. The overwhelming impression of the building was that of a small but fiercely self-protective fortress in a hostile environment, a castle with its drawbridge permanently fixed in the up position, or perhaps a jail. The interior walls, constructed of extruded concrete, curved around a sanctuary that, thanks to wall-to-wall carpeting and a complete lack of parallel reflective surfaces, was nearly acoustically dead, except for the occasional bizarre echo from across the room. Lacking any natural light, daily life in the church required constant artificial light and consequently stratospheric electric bills.

A remarkably diverse and faithful congregation eked out an existence in that building for thirty-five more years, but the truth is that the church's fate was sealed with that single architectural decision in the late 1960s. The Church of All Nations was midcentury mainline Protestantism in a microcosm, steamrolled by a wider culture that was not in the least committed to its success, yet eager to imitate the worst and most transient features of that culture—its industrial hubris, its interstate architecture, its fear of the urban and the poor. It did not matter that, as with many urban

mainline congregations, the faith preached from the pulpit was largely orthodox and evangelistic. The church was doomed not by theology or ideology, but by its captivity to a culture that was busy bulldozing down human communities in order to erect efficient facsimiles. Cultures have a powerful drive toward equilibrium, and Boston soon enough abandoned its fascination with modernistic architecture and the discredited rubrics of “urban renewal” and returned to its tremendous historical riches. But the Church of All Nations was too weak to recover and accompany the city surrounding it into renewed health. A few years ago, its doors closed for the last time.

Ninety years after Fosdick’s sermon, when we approach the question of Christians and culture in America, we have to pay a great deal of attention to the fundamentalists, their children and their children’s children. Far from fading into cultural irrelevance, Christians of traditional theological convictions have come to enjoy the greatest cultural prominence they have known since the nineteenth century—though true nineteenth-century-style dominance is well out of reach. The story of mainline Protestants’ engagement with culture is largely unidirectional—greater and greater accommodation paradoxically accompanied by smaller and smaller influence. (There are a few interesting exceptions, most notably the Duke Divinity School ethicist Stanley Hauerwas and his disciples.) But the story of conservative Protestants’ relationship to culture is a roller-coaster ride that compresses into one century all the postures I outlined in chapter four, and more.

#### **CONDEMNING CULTURE: FUNDAMENTALIST WITHDRAWAL**

Our stereotype of the twentieth-century Christian fundamentalist surely includes a sweaty preacher decrying the cultural innovation *du jour*. And closely linked with the popular idea of fundamentalism is the idea of withdrawal from culture into a sanctified and safe world of fellow believers. Of course, the fundamentalists did not condemn cultural goods like sturdy church buildings or modest clothing. They were even innovators in the use of new communication technologies like radio and television. Likewise, it is not really true to say that the fundamentalists withdrew from culture.

To withdraw from culture is to wander naked into the rain forest or the desert and never be seen again. While a handful of human beings have done exactly that, the fundamentalists did not. They, like all of us, were cultural beings.

Yet there are several grains of truth in describing fundamentalists as withdrawn from or condemning culture. First, fundamentalist Christians did often, as an article of faith, withdraw from many of the institutions of American culture, from entertainment to politics. Whether their absence was voluntary or forced, lamented or welcome, by midcentury Christians of orthodox theological convictions were scarce indeed at institutions where in many cases they had been dominant two generations before: eastern universities, newspapers and publishers, even the YMCA and YWCA.

Second, “holiness” for fundamentalists came to be closely associated with negative choices—avoiding cultural activities like dancing or going to the movies. I did not grow up in or near fundamentalist Christianity, but friends who did remember plenty of sermons about the *danger* of the world, but none about the *delights* of the world. And fundamentalist Christians, like modernist ones, indulged in an attractive but specious distinction between the church and the culture. Their unspoken assumption was that “the culture” was something distinguishable from their own daily life and enterprises, something that could be withdrawn from, rejected and condemned. In this respect they were just as modern as everyone around them, in accepting too uncritically an easy distinction between the “sacred” and the “secular.” This distinction, which served liberals by carving out a sphere of public life that did not have to entangle itself with religion and religious controversies, served fundamentalists by assuring them that it was possible to eschew “secular” pursuits altogether.

So while it is not strictly true to say that fundamentalists “condemned culture,” full stop, perhaps it is fair to say that their attitude toward culture—their basic posture—was one of suspicion and condemnation toward any human activity not explicitly justified on biblical grounds and engaged in by fully converted Christians. While the fundamentalist movement is smaller than it was in the twentieth century, you don’t have to travel far to encounter Christians for whom this suspicion is still second nature.

### CRITIQUING CULTURE: EVANGELICAL ENGAGEMENT

The second generation of fundamentalism quickly recognized the limitations of cultural condemnation. The “neo-evangelicals”—who chose that name to identify with the more culturally creative and engaged Protestants of the nineteenth century—began to call their fundamentalist communities back into relationship with the wider culture. After World War II a host of evangelical institutions arose that tried to strike a moderate stance between beating the world and joining it. The first editor of *Christianity Today*, Carl F. H. Henry, wrote a landmark book titled *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism*, questioning the disengagement of many fundamentalist church leaders from social issues like the labor movement and the ethics of war. Significantly, Henry, like many others in his generation, was educated at a decidedly nonfundamentalist institution (Boston University). He engaged in dialogue with modernist Christians and ensured that *Christianity Today*'s coverage ranged beyond intrachurch theological debates.

But the movement that most signaled a change in conservative Christians' posture toward culture was started by an intellectually adventurous evangelist named Francis Schaeffer, who along with his wife, Edith, formed in the mountains of Switzerland a community called L'Abri that attracted a generation of believing and unbelieving seekers. The posture the Schaeffers modeled toward culture was different from the fundamentalists': they sought to “engage” it, a term that would become a watchword for a whole evangelical generation. Schaeffer was especially interested in high-modern philosophy, art, music and cinema. He treated culture not as something to be condemned and avoided, but as a valuable dialogue partner that offered access to the reigning philosophical assumptions of the time, along with clues to the best way to convince skeptical moderns that the gospel was indeed the most compelling account of reality. Schaeffer and others appropriated the German idea of “worldview” to argue that cultural artifacts were expressions of deep-seated philosophical beliefs that were worth engaging rather than ignoring.

This was a dramatic and positive shift from fundamentalism's negativism. Yet as with all movements, L'Abri was both empowered by and lim-

ited by the temperament of its founding generation. The dominant posture toward culture the movement adopted was analysis—often impressively nuanced and learned analysis, to be sure. To “engage” the culture became, and is still today, a near-synonym for *thinking about* the culture. It was assumed, as we observed earlier, that action would follow from reflection, and transformation would follow from information. But the faculties that were most fully developed and valued were the ability to analyze and critique, not to actually sort out how to participate in the hurly-burly of cultural creativity in a pluralistic world. It is perhaps not unfair to say that to this day, evangelicalism, so deeply influenced by the Schaeffers and their many protégés, still produces better art critics than artists.

#### **COPYING CULTURE: THE JESUS MOVEMENT AND CCM**

Of the thousand flowers that bloomed in the 1960s and 1970s, surely the Jesus Movement was one of the least expected. In the midst of the counterculture a widespread revival brought thousands of young people to embrace a very theologically traditional form of Christian faith. But the Jesus Movement was anything but culturally traditional. The taming of the counterculture is so far advanced in our day—when pastors of the most bourgeois of churches may wear Hawaiian shirts and jam with the worship band—that it is hard to remember just how vigorously conventional churches resisted young people’s long hair, beads and, worst of all, electric guitars and drums. But in truth the gap between church culture and the wider culture, especially in matters of music and dress, was probably unsustainably wide even before the rise of a vigorous Christian counterculture forced the issue. Church music had remained resolutely classical, or at least classicalish, during one of the most fruitfully creative periods of American popular music, from swing to jazz to bebop and finally to rock ’n’ roll. Even before the first Christian rocker played a power chord, American Christianity was cut off from cultural forms that were becoming the primary musical language.

The Jesus Movement changed all that, parrying condemnations of rock’s allegedly demonic rhythms with a rallying cry borrowed, it was said, from Martin Luther: “Why should the devil have all the good music?” Chris-

tian rockers couldn't deny that the lifestyles and lyrics of rock 'n' roll were incompatible with Christianity, but they had a simple solution: change the content while adopting the form. Over the decade of the 1970s a musical movement that began with a few beleaguered bands touring in seriously beaten-down vans had grown to encompass an entire "industry" called Contemporary Christian Music (CCM).

The rise of CCM was a turning point in the shaping of evangelicalism as we know it today. No Christian movement in the twentieth century had so adroitly borrowed energy from the mainstream culture. Christians were no longer rowing grimly against the wind, as the fundamentalists had done, or tacking across the mainstream of modern culture to try to persuade modern seekers to go in a different direction, as Schaeffer had done so effectively. Now their sails were wide open, running downwind, as CCM producers and artists found a way to fit Jesus into any cultural form that was climbing the charts. All that was required was a keen ability to track the currents, and thanks to a steady influx of converts from "secular music" plus a generation of evangelical youth who had been primed for cultural critique, there was plenty of that to go around. Words could not describe my delight, as a thirteen-year-old just come to personal faith in Christ in the early 1980s, to discover a parallel universe of music that sounded just like the music that played on my clock radio every morning, replacing the sexual innuendo of mainstream pop with a kind of Christian innuendo of artfully expressed faith: "All over me, all over me / I've got the blood of an innocent man all over me."

CCM, along with the many other mini-industries it encouraged, embodied a dramatically different posture toward culture from either the fundamentalists' condemnation or the evangelicals' critique. It was essentially and often uncritically welcoming toward any cultural form that the wider culture might embrace. It shared with the best of evangelical cultural critics a crucial openness to the "common grace" that might be present in the unlikeliest places, but went further than they did to embrace active participation in those forms rather than merely arms-length investigation. But the flip side of this openness to form was a nearly puritanical approach to content, illustrated in the widely shared belief that to succeed in the CCM market, a recording had to meet a "Jesus quotient" in its lyrics.

Artists who attempted to convert from secular music to CCM were told in no uncertain terms that they had to abandon their earlier repertoire, which led to painful sights like the 1960s rocker Dion (“The Wanderer”) earnestly performing half-baked anthems in church sanctuaries.

**CONSUMING CULTURE:  
EVANGELICALISM’S PRESENT TENSE**

Perhaps because of discomfort with this lingering sacred-secular split, but probably also because of CCM’s tremendous commercial success, which has included a fair number of “crossover” acts that have successfully abandoned their Jesus quotient and gone mainstream, it has become fashionable in many Christian circles to make fun of CCM. The truth is that like critique and even condemnation, copying culture is a posture toward culture that is alive and well in American conservative Christianity. But it has been superseded by a simpler approach: simply cutting out the Christian middlemen who repackaged cultural forms for Christian consumption and going straight to the source, “secular” culture itself. The dominant posture among self-described evangelicals today toward culture is neither condemnation nor critique, nor even CCM’s imitation, but simply consumption.

The fundamentalists said, *Don’t go to the movies*. The evangelicals said, *Go to the movies—especially black and white movies by Ingmar Bergman—and probe their worldview*. Experimenters in CCM-style film would say, *Go to movies like Joshua, soft-focused retellings of the gospel message using cinematic form*. But most evangelicals today no longer forbid going to the movies, nor do we engage in earnest Francis Schaeffer-style critiques of the films we see—we simply go to the movies and, in the immortal word of Keanu Reeves, say, “Whoa.” We walk out of the movie theater amused, titillated, distracted or thrilled, just like our fellow consumers who do not share our faith. If anything, when I am among evangelical Christians I find that they seem to be more avidly consuming the latest offerings of commercial culture, whether *Pirates of the Caribbean* or *The Simpsons* or *The Sopranos*, than many of my non-Christian neighbors. They are content to be just like their fellow Americans, or perhaps, driven by a lingering sense of shame at their uncool forebears, just slightly more like their fellow Americans than everyone else.

## POSTURES AND GESTURES

I've found that a helpful word for these various responses is *postures*. Our posture is our learned but unconscious default position, our natural stance. It is the position our body assumes when we aren't paying attention, the basic attitude we carry through life. Often it's difficult for us to discern our own posture—as an awkward, gangly teenager I subconsciously slumped to minimize my height, something I would never have noticed if my mother hadn't pointed it out. Only by a fair amount of conscious effort did my posture become less self-effacing and more confident.

Now, in the course of a day I may need any number of bodily *gestures*. I will stoop down to pick up the envelopes that came through the mail slot. I will curl up in our oversized chair with my daughter to read a story. I will reach up to the top of my shelves to grab a book. If I am fortunate I will embrace my wife; if I am unfortunate I will have to throw up my hands to ward off an attack from an assailant. All these gestures can be part of the repertoire of daily living.

Over time, certain gestures may become habit—that is, become part of our posture. I've met former Navy SEALs who walk through life in a half-articulated crouch, ready to pounce or defend. I've met models and actors who carry themselves, even in their own home, as if they are on a stage. I've met soccer players who bounce on the balls of their feet wherever they go, agile and swift. And I've met teenage video-game addicts whose thumbs are always restless and whose shoulders betray a perpetual hunch toward an invisible screen. What began as an occasional gesture, appropriate for particular opportunities and challenges, has become a basic part of their approach to the world.

Something similar, it seems to me, has happened at each stage of American Christians' engagement with culture. Appropriate gestures toward particular cultural goods can become, over time, part of the posture Christians unconsciously adopt toward every cultural situation and setting. Indeed, the appeal of the various postures of condemning, critiquing, copying and consuming—the reason that all of them are still very much with us—is that each of these responses to culture is, at certain times and with specific cultural goods, a necessary gesture.

*Condemning culture.* Some cultural artifacts can only be condemned.

The international web of violence and lawlessness that sustains the global sex trade is culture, but there is nothing to do with it but eradicate it as quickly and effectively as we can. The only Christian thing to do is to reject it. Likewise, Nazism, a self-conscious attempt to enthrone a particular culture and destroy others, was another wide-ranging cultural phenomenon that demanded Christian condemnation, as Karl Barth, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and other courageous Christians saw in the 1930s. It would not have been enough to form a “Nazi Christian Fellowship” designed to serve the spiritual needs of up-and-comers within the Nazi party. Instead, Barth and Bonhoeffer authored the Barmen Declaration, an unequivocal rejection of the entire cultural apparatus that was Nazi Germany.

Among cultural artifacts around us right now, there are no doubt some that merit condemnation. Pornography is an astonishingly large and powerful industry that creates nothing good and destroys many lives. Our economy has become dangerously dependent on factories in far-off countries where workers are exploited and all but enslaved. Our nation permits the murder of vulnerable unborn children and often turns a blind eye as industrial plants near our poorest citizens pollute the environment of born children. The proper gesture toward such egregious destruction of the good human life is an emphatic *Stop!* backed with all the legitimate force we can muster.

*Critiquing culture.* Some cultural artifacts deserve to be critiqued. Perhaps the clearest example is the fine arts, which exist almost entirely to spark conversation about ideas and ideals, to raise questions about our cultural moment, and to prompt new ways of seeing the natural and cultural world. At least since the Renaissance, artists in the Western tradition want the rest of us to critique their work, to make something of what they have made, and to make the connections between their work and the traditions of art making as well as the broader streams of change in their culture as a whole. The proper thing to do with art, as Christians or indeed simply as human beings, is to critique it. Indeed, the better the art, the more it drives us to critique. We may watch a formulaic blockbuster for pure escapism, laugh ourselves silly and never say a word about it after we leave the theater. But the more careful and honest the filmmaking, the more we will want to ask one another, “What did you make of that?” Critique is the

gesture that corresponds to the particular calling of art and artists.

By the same token, other “gestures” toward art are almost always beside the point. Serious works of art are not made to be consumed—slotted unthinkingly into our daily lives—nor, by law in fact, may they be simply copied and appropriated for Christian use. Of all the possible gestures toward culture, condemnation, in particular, almost always ends up sounding shrill and silly when applied to art. If an attention-starved contemporary artist spatters dung on a portrait of the Madonna or slices up an embalmed shark, what harm is really done? These works are safely ensconced inside the walls of museums with hefty admission prices, not on the street or in the air endangering our children. Furthermore, it is difficult to think of a single instance where condemnation of a work of art has produced any result other than heightened notoriety for the work and the artist.

*Consuming culture.* There are many cultural goods for which by far the most appropriate response is to consume. When I make a pot of tea or bake a loaf of bread, I do not condemn it as a worldly distraction from spiritual things, nor do I examine it for its worldview and assumptions about reality. I drink the tea and eat the bread, enjoying them in their ephemeral goodness, knowing that tomorrow the tea will be bitter and the bread will be stale. The only appropriate thing to do with these cultural goods is to consume them.

*Copying culture.* Even the practice of copying cultural goods, borrowing their form from the mainstream culture and infusing them with Christian content, has its place. When we set out to communicate or live the gospel, we never start from scratch. Even before church buildings became completely indistinguishable from warehouse stores, church architects were borrowing from “secular” architects. Long before the Contemporary Christian Music industry developed its uncanny ability to echo any mainstream music trend, church musicians from Bach to the Wesleys were borrowing well-known tunes and reworking them for liturgical use. Why shouldn’t the church borrow from any and every cultural form for the purposes of worship and discipleship? The church, after all, is a culture-making enterprise itself, concerned with making something of the world in the light of the story that has taken us by surprise and upended our

assumptions about that world. Copying culture can even be, at its best, a way of honoring culture, demonstrating the lesson of Pentecost that every human language, every human cultural form, is capable of bearing the good news.

### **WHEN GESTURES BECOME POSTURES**

The problem is not with any of these gestures—condemning, critiquing, consuming, copying. All of them can be appropriate responses to particular cultural goods. Indeed, each of them may be the only appropriate response to a particular cultural good. But the problem comes when these gestures become too familiar, become the only way we know how to respond to culture, become etched into our unconscious stance toward the world and become postures.

Because while there is much to be condemned in human culture, the posture of condemnation leaves us closed off from the beauty and possibility as well as the grace and mercy in many forms of culture. It also makes us into hypocrites, since we are hardly free of culture ourselves. The culture of our churches and Christian communities is often just as lamentable as the “secular” culture we complain about, something our neighbors can see perfectly well. The posture of condemnation leaves us with nothing to offer even when we manage to persuade our neighbors that a particular cultural good should be discarded. And most fundamentally, having condemnation as our posture makes it almost impossible for us to reflect the image of a God who called the creation “very good” and, even in the wake of the profound cultural breakdown that led to the Flood, promised never to utterly destroy humankind and human culture again. If we are known mostly for our ability to poke holes in every human project, we will probably not be known as people who bear the hope and mercy of God.

Similarly, there is much to be said for critiquing particular cultural goods. But when critique becomes a posture, we end up strangely passive, waiting for culture to deliver us some new item to talk about. Critique as a posture, while an improvement over condemnation as a posture, can leave us strangely unable simply to *enjoy* cultural goods, preoccupied with our interrogation of their “worldview” and “presuppositions.” The posture of critique also tempts us toward the academic fallacy of believing that once

we have analyzed something, we have understood it. Often true understanding, of a person or a cultural good, requires participation—throwing ourselves fully into the enjoyment and experience of someone or something without reserving an intellectual, analytical part of ourselves outside of the experience like a suspicious and watchful librarian.

Cultural copying, too, is a good gesture and a poor posture. It is good to honor the many excellences of our cultures by bringing them into the life of the Christian community, whether that is a group of Korean American chefs serving up a sumptuous church supper of bulgogi and *ssamjang* or a dreadlocked electric guitarist articulating lament and hope through a vintage tube amp.

But when copying becomes our posture, a whole host of unwanted consequences follows. Like the critics, we become passive, waiting to see what interesting cultural good will be served up next for our imitation and appropriation. In fast-changing cultural domains those whose posture is imitation will find themselves constantly slightly behind the times, so that church worship music tends to be dominated by styles that disappeared from the scene several years before. Any embarrassment about being cultural laggards is mitigated by the fact that like a private highway that is only open to cars with fish emblems, our copy-culture by definition will never be seen by the vast majority of the mainstream culture. And in this way, when *all* we do is copy culture for our own Christian ends, cultural copying fails to love or serve our neighbors.

The greatest danger of copying culture, as a posture, is that it may well become all too successful. We end up creating an entire subcultural world within which Christians comfortably move and have their being without ever encountering the broader cultural world they are imitating. We breed a generation that prefers facsimile to reality, simplicity to complexity (for cultural copying, almost by definition, ends up sanding off the rough and surprising edges of any cultural good it appropriates), and familiarity to novelty. Not only is this a generation incapable of genuine creative participation in the ongoing drama of human culture making, it is dangerously detached from a God who is anything but predictable and safe.

For a lesson in the dangers of adopting the posture of cultural copying, Christians might do well to look to Hollywood in the 1990s and 2000s,

when major studios seemed mired in an endless series of sequels and adaptations, paralyzed by a dearth of original storytelling. Even movies beloved by Christians—perhaps *especially* movies beloved by Christians—fell prey to this temptation. The original Chronicles of Narnia were the creation of an Oxford don whose posture toward culture was anything but imitative. But movies based on the Chronicles of Narnia are almost required to be slavish imitations of the original, precisely because the original stories were so successful in carving out new horizons of possibility and impossibility. This is not to say that they are not impressive cultural artifacts, achievements of technology, performance and direction. But their very charter is to faithfully transfer an original work in one medium to a derivative work in another. As gestures, the Narnia movies are delightful; but if they reflect and perpetuate a posture of imitation, they only reinforce the poverty of a culture that has forgotten how to tell new stories.

Finally, consumption is the posture of cultural denizens who simply take advantage of all that is offered up by the ever-busy purveyors of novelty, risk-free excitement and pain avoidance. It would not be entirely true to say that consumers are undiscerning in their attitude toward culture, because discernment of a kind is at the very heart of consumer culture. Consumer culture teaches us to pay exquisite attention to our own preferences and desires. Someone whose posture is consumption can spend hours researching the most fashionable and feature-laden cell phone; can know exactly what combination of espresso shots, regular and decaf, whole and skim, amaretto and chocolate, makes for their perfect latte; can take on extraordinary commitments of debt and commuting time in order to live in the right community. But while all of this involves care and work—we might even say “cultural engagement”—it never deviates from the core premise of consumer culture: we are most human when we are purchasing something someone else has made.

Of all the possible postures toward culture, consumption is the one that lives most unthinkingly within a culture’s preexisting horizons of possibility and impossibility. The person who condemns culture does so in the name of some other set of values and possibilities. The whole point of critique is becoming aware of the horizons that a given culture creates, for better or worse. Even copying culture and bringing it into the life of

the Christian community puts culture to work in the service of something believed to be more true and lasting. But consumption, as a posture, is capitulation: letting the culture set the terms, assuming that the culture knows best and that even our deepest longings (for beauty, truth, love) and fears (of loneliness, loss, death) have some solution that fits comfortably within our culture's horizons, if only we can afford to purchase it.

### ARTISTS AND GARDENERS

For a while my own posture toward much of the culture around me was suspicion. I would walk through a mall taking notes on crass commercialism. Upon learning that someone had achieved a certain amount of cultural influence I would begin probing for signs of idolatry, egoism and vanity. I scanned the newspaper looking for obituaries on not just the obituary page but the front page—signs of cultural decay and decline. Of course, in every case there was plenty for me to find, since our malls are full of commercialism, our cultural heroes are often astonishingly full of themselves, and our newspapers never fail to deliver bad news.

But the more I adopted a *posture* of suspicion and critique, the more I felt I was missing something. I had trouble accounting for my own consumption—was my delight in my Apple laptop simply a sign that I had surrendered to the siren song of consumer culture? Disturbingly often I encountered people of tremendous cultural creativity who seemed to be enjoying themselves too sincerely and faithfully to be mere idolaters. And the same newspaper that delivered news of yet another cultural meltdown also brought reasons for hope: an artist working to create beauty in a war zone, tens of thousands of spring-break volunteers descending on a hurricane-ravaged coast, and a big-box retailer that actually paid its workers well, covered their health insurance and sold fine wine to boot.

I thought back to my years serving with a campus ministry at the world's most prestigious university. For many years we were adept at deconstructing the pretensions of Harvard and calling students to a countercultural kingdom life that would undermine (or, to use one of our favorite words, *subvert*) Harvard's power. Our specialty in Harvard critique certainly attracted a certain kind of student, those disaffected from Harvard for one reason or another. But we had a very hard time accounting, in the language

of faith, for the delights of a place like Harvard: the thrill of research in a well-equipped laboratory, the ineffable joys of the library stacks, the exhaustion and exhilaration of rowing in a six-man boat on the Charles at 5:30 in the morning. I suspect that many students who visited our fellowship, oriented as it was toward critiquing the culture, simply moved on, puzzled at our diffidence or even annoyed at our apparent hypocrisy. If Harvard was so bad, why didn't we just counsel students to leave and give their tuition money to the poor?

What was missing, I've come to believe, were the two postures that are most characteristically biblical—the two postures that have been least explored by Christians in the last century. They are found at the very beginning of the human story, according to Genesis: like our first parents, we are to be creators and cultivators. Or to put it more poetically, we are artists and gardeners.

The postures of the artist and the gardener have a lot in common. Both begin with contemplation, paying close attention to what is already there. The gardener looks carefully at the landscape; the existing plants, both flowers and weeds; the way the sun falls on the land. The artist regards her subject, her canvas, her paints with care to discern what she can make with them.

And then, after contemplation, the artist and the gardener both adopt a posture of purposeful work. They bring their creativity and effort to their calling. The gardener tends what has gone before, making the most of what is beautiful and weeding out what is distracting or useless. The artist can be more daring: she starts with a blank canvas or a solid piece of stone and gradually brings something out of it that was never there before. They are acting in the image of One who spoke a world into being and stooped down to form creatures from the dust. They are creaturely creators, tending and shaping the world that original Creator made.

I wonder what we Christians are known for in the world outside our churches. Are we known as critics, consumers, copiers, condemners of culture? I'm afraid so. Why aren't we known as cultivators—people who tend and nourish what is best in human culture, who do the hard and painstaking work to preserve the best of what people before us have done? Why aren't we known as creators—people who dare to think and do something

that has never been thought or done before, something that makes the world more welcoming and thrilling and beautiful?

### THE POSTURES OF FREEDOM

The remarkable thing about having good posture (as my mother never ceased to tell me when I was growing up) is that if you have good posture, you are free to make any number of gestures. As we're reminded when we encounter a skilled dancer or athlete, good posture preserves our body's basic freedom, allowing us to respond to the changing environment with fluidity and grace. But poor posture—being bent into a particular position from which we can never quite escape—leaves us unable to exercise a full range of motion. With good posture, all gestures are available to us; over time, with poor posture, all we can do is a variation of what we have done before.

And the simple truth is that in the mainstream of culture, cultivation and creativity are the postures that confer legitimacy for the other gestures. People who consider themselves stewards of culture—guardians of what is best in a neighborhood, an institution or a field of cultural practice—gain the respect of their peers. Even more so, those who go beyond being mere custodians to creating new cultural goods are the ones who have the world's attention. Indeed, those who have cultivated and created are precisely the ones who have the legitimacy to condemn—whose denunciations, rare and carefully chosen, carry outsized weight. Cultivators and creators are the ones who are invited to critique and whose critiques are often the most telling and fruitful. Cultivators and creators can even copy without becoming mere imitators, drawing on the work of others yet extending it in new and exciting ways—think of the best of hip-hop's culture of sampling, which does not settle for merely reproducing the legends of jazz and R & B but places their work in new sonic contexts. And when they consume, cultivators and creators do so without becoming mere consumers. They do not derive their identity from what they consume but what they create.

If there is a constructive way forward for Christians in the midst of our broken but also beautiful cultures, it will require us to recover these two biblical postures of cultivation and creation. And that recovery will involve revisiting the biblical story itself, where we discover that God is more intimately and eternally concerned with culture than we have yet come to believe.

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