



# CULTURE MAKING

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

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# PART 1: CULTURE

## Introduction and Chapter 1—*The Horizons of the Possible*

1. What comes to mind when you hear the word *culture*?
2. In your experience, how do Christians usually talk about “culture”?
3. The author writes, “Culture is what we make of the world” (p. 23). What does he mean?
4. How are omelets and interstate highways examples of culture? What do they make possible and impossible?
5. Select an everyday object or cultural phenomenon. As a case study, examine it through the lenses of the five questions for diagnosing culture (pp. 29–30). (For some examples, visit [http://www.culture-making.com/five\\_questions/](http://www.culture-making.com/five_questions/).)
  - *What does this cultural artifact assume about the way the world is?*
  - *What does this cultural artifact assume about the way the world should be?*
  - *What does this cultural artifact make possible?*
  - *What does this cultural artifact make impossible (or at least very difficult)?*
  - *What new forms of culture are created in response to this artifact?*
6. If culture is inescapable and “there is no withdrawing from culture” (p. 36), what implications does this have for our lives as Christians?

## Chapter 2—*Cultural Worlds*

1. Think about a favorite hit movie, TV show, book or music album. Now consider another such entity that was less “successful.” How do they differ in how they shaped culture?
2. The author quotes Steve Jobs: “Real artists ship” (p. 40). What does this mean? What might be examples of cultural artifacts that didn’t “ship”?

3. How do cultural goods have particular “publics”?
4. How do people wield cultural power? How do they experience cultural poverty?
5. What different spheres and scales of culture do you participate in? In what cultures are you at home and wield influence, and in what cultures do you feel out of place?
6. What different places have you lived? How do their cultures differ?
7. “There is no such thing as ‘the Culture’” (p. 48). Do you agree or disagree? What implications does this have for how we talk about and interact with “culture”?
8. In what ways are you a cultural immigrant? In what ways are you called to be a cultural missionary?

### Chapter 3—*Teardowns, Technology and Change*

1. How have you renovated your home or living space? What changes did you make, and why? In what ways were the changes beneficial, and in what ways were they not?
2. How might cultural changes that are intended to make “progress” have negative unintended consequences?
3. The author says, “The faster a given layer of culture changes, the less long-term effect it has on the horizons of possibility and impossibility” (p. 56). What are examples of short-term changes with little lasting impact? of cultural changes that take longer to accomplish but with more long-term significance?
4. Where do you see Christians grasping for “silver bullets” (p. 59) of Christian influence?
5. “Culture is much more than a ‘worldview’” (p. 60). What are some advantages and limitations of worldview thinking?
6. Rather than thinking ourselves into new ways of behaving, how might we behave ourselves into new ways of thinking?

#### Chapter 4—*Cultivation and Creation*

1. Think of a recent meal that you prepared. How was it an act of culture making?
2. “The only way to change culture is to create more of it” (p. 67). What are examples of this, in your own life or in society at large?
3. Consider the four strategies, on pages 68-70, of condemning culture, critiquing culture, copying culture and consuming culture. How have you or others done each of these?
4. Think of a piece of culture (a meal, a tool, a movie, a song) and list a few of the cultural contexts and traditions that helped shape its creation.
5. How is cultivation different from creation? How is it similar?
6. “Cultivation is a somewhat less appealing word, I’ve found, than creation” (p. 75). Is that true for you? Do you know of people, or situations, where the opposite seems more true?
7. What is an example of a cultural activity you’ve participated in that, like playing the piano, took diligent, disciplined practice before you could experience the creative, fun aspects that initially drew you to it?
8. The author points out that, as with a child learning language, a lot of the discipline of cultivating culture involves imitation rather than creativity. Is this sort of imitation the same thing as “copying culture” that we discussed earlier in the chapter? How might they differ?
9. What’s an act of “culture keeping” that has helped make possible your own “culture making”?

#### Chapter 5—*Gestures and Postures*

1. What different cultural contexts and approaches are assumed by each of the four Gospels?
2. What are some ways the author argues that American Christianity influenced American culture during the nineteenth century? In what ways did the influence run the other way?

3. In what ways have America's Christian fundamentalists condemned culture? What are some aspects of culture that they embraced? Are any of these familiar in your experience with the church?
4. What are some of your experiences with the "evangelical" strategy of cultural critique?
5. CCM (Christian Contemporary Music) provides an example of Christians copying what was going on in popular culture—though with the necessary changes to allow for what the author calls the "Jesus quotient." In what ways has this cultural strategy been problematic? In what ways has it been effective? Can you think of examples where CCM has actually represented a different cultural posture (condemnation, critique, cultivation)?
6. Do you agree with the author that today's evangelicals largely exhibit a posture of simply consuming whatever the broader culture has to offer? Think of some examples of your own cultural consumption that you take for granted. How do you think earlier generations of American Christians might have responded to the same cultural offerings?
7. Have there been times in your own life when a gesture of condemnation, critique or copying became a posture? How did that happen? What did you gain and lose by taking on that posture?
8. How does consumption differ from the other postures toward culture the author discusses in this section?
9. How do the postures of artist and gardener differ from the other ones discussed in this chapter?
10. Is there a cultural arena, large or small, where you've made your own transition from suspicious critic to active cultivator or creator?

## PART 2: GOSPEL

### Chapter 6—*The Garden and the City*

1. What does humanity's being made in God's image imply about our relation to the created world? about our role as creators?
2. As a reminder that we too have the gift and chance to create things that are entirely new, come up with—and speak out loud—a sentence that no one has ever spoken before.
3. What does the author mean in saying that “creation is relational” (p. 105)? What does that imply about God? about us?
4. What's an example from your own life of how “creation requires cultivation”? How do separating, ordering and pruning cause creation to facilitate creativity?
5. Why do you think God ends the creative process in Genesis 1 with celebration and rest? What does that teach us about our own approaches to creation?
6. A garden, says the author, is nature plus culture. How does that play out in the Genesis 2 story? If you've ever cultivated plants, reflect on how that has played out in your own gardens.
7. What is the significance of God's having Adam name the animals? What does it say about God's view of culture and how culture gets made?
8. The author says, “culture is God's first and best gift to humanity” (p. 110). Do you agree? In what ways, in your own experience, might this claim be surprising?
9. What are some of the differences between wilderness and a theme park? Do you agree with the author that it's difficult to be fully human in either of them? Why?

10. How does culture change in the Genesis story after the Fall?
11. What were the builders of the Tower of Babel trying to undo with their culture? How was God's response both a curse and an act of mercy?
12. How does the author argue for the truthfulness of the "primordial" first chapters of Genesis—and what does he seem to mean by truthfulness? Do you agree or disagree with him?

### Chapter 7—*The Least of Nations*

1. What are some examples of how God responds to humankind's early cultural disasters with acts of cultural grace? What does that imply about the nature of culture?
2. What are some of the ways Israel enacted each of the six "cultural postures" during its history—condemning, critiquing, copying, consuming, cultivating, creating?
3. How are time, place and size essential elements of the story of Israel's cultural development and training in faithfulness?
4. In what ways does the story of Israel's "education in faith" (p. 131) extend beyond being purely spiritual or religious and into the broader realm of cultural practice?

### Chapter 8—*Jesus as Culture Maker*

1. What do Jesus' genealogies suggest about his relation to culture?
2. List some of the ways that Jesus may have acted as a culture cultivator, especially during the first thirty years of his life.
3. How was Jesus a culture creator with respect to his approach to teaching? meals? the temple?
4. In what ways does the author suggest the phrase "the kingdom of God" would have different cultural resonances in first-century Palestine than it does for us today?
5. What are some of the ways that Jesus' "prescription for changing the heart involves changes in culture" (p. 139)?

6. What does the author mean by “cultural dead ends” (p. 141)?
7. The author suggests the resurrection is underappreciated as a culture-shaping event. Why is the first example he cites—the shift of the early Christians’ day of worship from the seventh to the first day of the week—so significant?
8. What does the transformation of the cross from symbol of torture to a symbol of life suggest about the Gospel’s unique culture-making role?

### Chapter 9—*From Pentecost . . .*

1. “The book of Acts is a book of cities” (p. 147). How does that shape the culture, and cultural impact, of early Christianity?
2. In what ways does the story of Pentecost parallel the Genesis 12 story of Babel? In what ways does it invert it?
3. What is the central conflict of the book of Acts? How does culture play into it, and what is the church’s cultural response to it in the Council of Jerusalem?
4. “What Acts sets off is a vast and lengthy process of cultural discernment” (p. 155). What did this look like for the early church? How did it represent a change from the attitude toward culture that the first believers would have grown up with?
5. Acts has only 28 chapters. So why is the last section titled “Acts 29” (p. 156)?
6. Give some examples of the early church’s cultural creativity that enabled—as the quotations from sociologist Rodney Stark show—the massive growth of Christianity in its first three centuries.
7. The author suggests there is a false split between “spiritual” matters—the realm of religious writings—and “cultural” ones (of the sort studied by sociologists). Why is this division problematic?

### Chapter 10—. . . *To Revelation*

1. How, in the author’s view, does Revelation shift in its scope from its beginning chapters to the “very end”? What parallels and inversions do you notice to the opening chapters of Genesis?



2. In general, are the descriptions of the Holy City more likely to make your “eyes widen with expectation or glaze over with boredom” (p. 163)? Why do you think that is? Did reading this section change your reaction?
3. How is the New Jerusalem a reversal of the Tower of Babel?
4. In what ways is the New City an immensely cultural creation, even down to the materials it’s made of?
5. How does the New Jerusalem differ from the cultural forms (city, temple) on which it is based? What does that suggest for the role of culture in it?
6. List a few of the cultural goods to be found in the “redeemed city” as described in Isaiah 60. What’s significant about their origins?
7. What do you make of the idea of “non-Christian” goods having a place in the New Jerusalem?
8. The author suggests that some cultural artifacts will be excluded from the City as dead ends or half-baked mediocrities. List three or four examples of cultural offerings that you suspect are irredeemable.
9. Now list five cultural artifacts that you hope, in broken and redeemed form, will be part of “the glory and honor of the nations” (p. 170) that will furnish the New Jerusalem.
10. What are a few of your own cultural endeavors—creating, cultivating—that you hope will be some small part of that same glory and honor?
11. What, the author asks, will we spend our (eternal) time doing in the New Jerusalem? How does that differ from your own notions of heaven?
12. What are some examples of “the glory and honor of the nations,” as you listed in questions 9 and 10, that require participation—can’t just be looked at, but have to be performed?
13. How is the work of the citizens of the New Jerusalem a continuation of God’s original mandate to Adam and Eve? How does it move beyond that earliest vocation?

### Chapter 11—*The Glorious Impossible*

1. What do you think the author means in saying “the gospel cannot be contained within culture” (p. 176)?
2. How does the promise and challenge of the gospel mirror the inherent tension of the phrase “the glorious impossible”?
3. What are the different ways the gospel seems to be gloriously impossible (a) in cultural contexts where Christianity is at the center, and (b) in places where Christianity exists mostly in the margins?
4. How does the author use the story of the Rwandan genocide and its after-effects to trace out the tension of the glorious impossible—of failed Christendom but also of opportunities for grace and goodness to be born out of devastating tragedy? Are there other examples from recent history that might tell similar stories?
5. Did you skip the section about Niebuhr’s cultural typology? Why or why not?
6. What might be some of the differences between a book called *Christ and Culture* and one called *Jesus and the Cultures*?
7. What are some of the dangers of moving from a concept of “Christ transforming culture” to one of “Christians transforming culture”?
8. Though Niebuhr’s analysis traces the precariousness of our cultural activity (p. 183), what, in the author’s view, does he miss out on showing?

## PART 3: CALLING

### Chapter 12—*Why We Can't Change the World*

1. Why do you suspect there are so many books published these days with the phrase “changed the world” in the title?
2. What’s the problem, according to sociologists, about the very idea of trying to change the world?
3. More basically, what does it mean to change the world? Think of three situations where “changing the world” would mean rather different things.
4. What is the temptation that the author tries to counter with his repetition of the phrase “past performance is no guarantee of future results”?
5. What does “survivor bias” mean? How does it give us a false sense of the world-changing ability of certain individuals and cultural innovations?
6. What’s the difference between necessary and sufficient conditions (p. 195)? What happens when we start confusing the two?
7. Think of an example of a person or position that at first glance seems to easily have the power to “change the world” on a significant scale. What are some ways that this power may in fact be quite circumscribed?
8. How does scale (from small to large) affect our prospects for world-changing? Name a situation or scale where you have a lot of world-changing power; one where you have no world-changing power at all; and one where you have some power, but far less than you’d hope.
9. Why does the power of cultural goods quickly surpass the power of the people who make those goods?
10. What are one or two cultural goods in your own everyday life (things you’ve received, purchased or created) that have had unintended consequences?

11. Why is the implied phrase “for the better” that comes after much discussion of “changing the world” perhaps more tenuous than we like to imagine?
12. Did you find yourself reading this chapter with impatience, with “a mixture of relief and depression” (p. 201), or with something in between?

### Chapter 13—*The Traces of God*

1. What are some of the dangers of reading God’s intentions into historical events? Can you think of an event (historic or contemporary) that you at one point thought was a clear and understandable “act of God” but about which now you’re not so sure?
2. That said, what are the two biblical events that underscore our need to recognize and respond to God’s hand in history? What is it about the after-effects of these two events that makes the argument that God was clearly at work in them most plausible?
3. What do the exodus and the resurrection stories tell us about God’s relation to the powerless? What do they tell us about his relation to the powerful?
4. Give an example or two of present-day “elites [using] their privilege to create cultural goods that primarily serve other elites” (p. 209).
5. Give one or two examples of culture cultivating and culture making by those with limited cultural power that reinforces “the way of the world.”
6. Think of a few ways in which the elites can serve the powerless that are, though service, nonetheless also “the way of the world”—leaving the powerless dependent and needy.
7. What do Jesus’ “inaugural address” in Luke 4 and the quoted passages from Isaiah 40 and 57 (pp. 210-11) suggest about God’s plan to use both the powerless and the powerful for his purposes? In what ways is this both good news for the poor and “not unequivocally bad news” for the powerful?
8. Pick two cultural realms—one small-scale (like your home, workplace or neighborhood) and another large-scale (like a nation, industry or demographic group). Now ask, and try to answer, the “most basic

questions” (p. 214) suggested for those who believe God is on the move in human culture:

- *What is God doing in these two cultural realms?*
- *What is his vision (in the realms from the previous question) for the horizons of the possible and impossible?*
- *Who are the poor who are having good news preached to them?*
- *Who are the powerful who are called to spend their power on behalf of the powerless?*
- *Where is the impossible becoming possible?*

### Chapter 14—*Power*

1. What do you think about the author’s statement that practically none of us can become celebrities like Princess Diana, but each of us can become saints like Mother Teresa (with faces to match)? Does this thought seem realistic? attractive? challenging? sobering?
2. What is the author’s definition of power (p. 219)?
3. What do you make of the idea that cultural goods can be proposed but never truly imposed?
4. Name a time/place/situation where you’ve experienced cultural power (you were comfortable, your jokes were funny, your ideas were accepted). Now name one where you’ve experienced cultural powerlessness. What was that like?
5. Why, of money, sex and power, is power “by far the most slippery and most dangerous” (p. 222)? Do you agree? Is this true for everyone or just for certain people?
6. Do you agree that “no one ever has enough power”?
7. Can you think of an example from recent history (or your own experience) of good intentions becoming subverted by the need to amass and maintain power?
8. Why do you think the church has a much easier time talking about proper stewardship of sex or money than it does talking about power?

9. What aspects of power does God invite us to leave behind, and what does he offer us in their place?
10. How does embracing disciplines help us when facing temptation?
11. How does the discipline of service help us deal with the gift and temptation of power? What does a servant do with his or her power?
12. Do you already practice—regularly or occasionally—a discipline (perhaps like the author’s commitment to annual travel outside the developed world) that offers you the chance and challenge to step away from whatever power you have and into a more humble, dependant servant’s role?
13. What is the difference between spending our cultural power alongside those less powerful than ourselves and spending it on behalf of them? How do these two modes affect the way we—and those we’re serving—relate to power? Which is more empowering? To whom?
14. How does the author define stewardship? What is the difference between service and stewardship? How does each relate to our own power and to the power of those we’re working with?
15. How is stewardship closer to investing than to charity?
16. “Where have you successfully proposed a new cultural good?” (p. 235). Make a list of examples. What do these say about the realms, large or small, in which you have cultural power?
17. Now that you’ve thought about where and when you have cultural power, ask, “With whom am I sharing my power?” How are you making it possible for others to cultivate and create culture? List a few individuals and examples.

## Chapter 15—*Community*

1. What is the ratio the author is describing as “the 3, the 12 and the 120”?
2. Think of three different cultural goods—say, something you could buy in a store, something you’d find in a museum and something that has to be consumed (eaten, heard, watched, played)—and think about the kind of groups that created them. Who might have been their 3, 12 and 120?

3. Give an example from the Old and New Testament of the ratio of 3 : 12 : 120—bonus points for citing one not used by the author!
4. What do you make of the author's claim, "Absolutely no one makes culture alone" (p. 247)?
5. Who are your "3"? Are you part of more than one 3 in different realms of culture making? Are your current 3 different than the creative community you were part of a few years ago? than you imagine being a part of in a few years' time?
6. What does it mean to be willing to "start and end small" (p. 248)?

### Chapter 16—*Grace*

1. Have you known people (no need to name names!) who fit into the categories of "strivers," "legacies" and "children of grace"? What was distinct about how people in each category seemed to view culture and culture making?
2. What are a few gifts from God that are so basic you can tend to overlook or dismiss them? What would your version be of the prayer, "I thank you, Lord, that I woke up this morning in my right mind, and with the use and activity of my limbs"?
3. What might the opening of the parable of the prodigal sower, in which he spreads the seed widely, have to teach us about creating culture?
4. What does the conclusion of the parable tell us about the results of our efforts at culture making?
5. List examples from your own experience of where your cultural "sowing" has yielded varied results: times when nothing came of the attempt; times where you saw success, but roughly equal to the amount of effort you put in; and times of real multiplication, where what you got out of the effort far exceeded, in quantity and grace, what you put in.
6. The author says the most important question for discerning our calling is "Where do you experience grace—divine multiplication that far exceeds your efforts?" (p. 257). What's your answer to that currently? Have there been times in your life where the answer would have been different?

7. What are some of your own disciplines—like the scales played daily by a professional musician—that you’ve found are necessary (though not sufficient) in making way for grace?
8. How do some of your own disciplines bring you to “keen awareness of our fundamental poverty” (p. 258)? Why might this be a good thing?
9. What happens when we fail at our attempts to create culture? How does grace fit into the picture then? Is there a culture endeavor you’ve attempted where you experienced both grace and failure?
10. What does it mean that our best efforts at culture making will take us “to the intersection of grace and [the] cross” (p. 262)?
11. Why, according to Mother Teresa (p. 261), was suffering so important to her and her followers’ ministry?
12. Is there such a thing as too much suffering in our culture making? Is there such a thing as not enough suffering?
13. List a few people you know who seem to have found their “intersection of grace and [the] cross” in different callings. What does that joining of grace and suffering look like for each of them?
14. What is the author’s final exhortation for those who want to be culturally creative? Is it something you’re excited to follow? What would be your next step toward doing so?