

## INTRODUCTION



**T**he essence of childhood is innocence. The essence of youth is awareness. The essence of adulthood is responsibility. This book is for people and a Christian community on the threshold of cultural responsibility.

For several decades now, many of American Christianity's most dynamic expressions have been youth ministries—even when they seem to serve grownups. Our goal, like that of many a plugged-in teenager, has been cultural awareness. We've paid the culture around us the ultimate compliment: careful study and, often, imitation. We have put in countless hours (often enjoyable ones!) “engaging culture”—looking, with surprising success, for hopeful signs of God in the world outside the church and also finding, with depressing frequency, signs of the enduring emptiness of that same world. Indeed, the desire to engage culture—to listen to it, learn from it and affirm it while also critiquing it—is one of the most hopeful developments of recent decades.

Our youth ministries have been astonishingly successful. Many of the most influential leaders of the evangelical movement began their careers with parachurch organizations like Youth for Christ, Campus Crusade for Christ, Youth Specialties, InterVarsity Christian Fellowship and a host

of others. Some of our most prominent churches began literally as youth groups. In more recent years there has been a surge of events for college students and young adults that combine passionate faith with fluency in our media-saturated youth culture (along with media's large production budgets), as well as churches that seem to rip each month's sermon series directly from YouTube and BoxOfficeMojo.com. I am who I am because of culturally relevant ministries like these—and I spent fifteen years doing ministry in those contexts.

But what happens after youth ministry? What does it mean to be not just culturally aware but culturally responsible? Not just culture consumers or even just culture critics, but culture makers? Our newly regained cultural awareness means that we are not satisfied, as earlier generations might have been, with separating our faith from our “worldly” activities. We want our lives—our whole lives—to matter for the gospel. But what exactly does that mean?

This book is an attempt to point my fellow Christians toward new, and also very old, directions for understanding our calling in culture. I hope to offer us a new vocabulary, a new story and a new set of questions.

First, a new vocabulary, because our ways of talking about culture—how it works, how it changes, how it influences us and what we hope for from it—often do not serve us well. We talk about “the culture” even though culture is always cultures, plural: full of diversity, variety and history. We talk about culture as if it were primarily a set of ideas when it is primarily a set of tangible goods. We talk about “engaging,” “impacting” and “transforming the culture,” when in fact the people who most carefully study culture tend to stress instead how much we are transformed by it. If we are to be at all responsible agents in the midst of culture, we need to learn new ways of speaking about what we are doing.

Of course little of what I offer in this book is truly new. The first section borrows heavily from the field of sociology, which has developed an imposing apparatus for understanding this most characteristic and complex of human phenomena. (The literary critic Terry Eagleton observes, not reassuringly, that *culture* has been called the second most complicated word in the English language, after *nature*.) Most of the seminal writing in sociology, alas for us plainspoken Americans, bears the unmistakable

imprint of the German language in which its central insights were first formulated. In trying to translate from the language of specialists, I have trampled merrily through the carefully tended gardens of any number of scholars, and they will no doubt look on with horror at my attempts at simplification. In particular, the sociologists who are cited in the notes and thanked in the acknowledgments should be absolved of all responsibility for my ham-handedness—still, I hope that I have captured some of the essential ideas that Christians need to be more careful and creative in the world.

In the second section I'll be offering a new story or, more precisely, a new way of reading a very old story: the story of culture as told through the pages of Scripture, from its opening chapters to its surprise ending.

Until recently, Christians seem to have forgotten how to tell the story of Scripture as a story that is both a genuine disclosure of God's presence in the world and a deeply cultural artifact that intersects over and over with concrete historical realities. Liberal Christians, enamored with the historical-critical method, have done a fine job of dismantling the claims of Scripture in light of its cultural context, but evangelical Christians have often done a fine job of ignoring the cultural import of Scripture while defending its divine inspiration.

I am by no means the first writer in recent years to recapture a cultural way of reading the good news. We believe that rediscovering the cultural context of the gospel does nothing to prevent it from being good news from above, before and beyond us, and is actually the key to it being fully good news for us. I have benefited most of all from the many thinkers in the Reformed community who have followed the Dutch statesman Abraham Kuyper's call to Christian cultural responsibility. I have tried to credit a representative sampling of them in the notes, but my simplifications will be all too apparent to those who have made more pilgrimages to Geneva and Grand Rapids than I.

Finally, I want to offer a new set of questions about our calling. What is it, exactly, that we are called to do in the world? Are we called to "transform culture" or to "change the world"? If we are to be culture makers, where in the world do we begin? How do we deal with power, that most difficult of all cultural realities, and its inescapably uneven distribution?

Readers who are looking for seven easy steps to cultural influence will have to look elsewhere—because I do not happen to believe that anything lasting is easy. What we most have to learn about being creators of culture is the very thing we human beings find hardest to learn: everything about our calling, from start to finish, is a gift. What is most needed in our time are Christians who are deeply serious about cultivating and creating but who wear that seriousness lightly—who are not desperately trying to change the world but who also wake up every morning eager to create.

The worst thing we could do is follow that familiar advice to “pray as if it all depended on God, and work as if it all depended on you.” Rather, we need to become people who work as if it all depends on God—because it does, and because that is the best possible news. We work for, indeed work in the life and power of, a gracious and infinitely resourceful Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. And we need to know ourselves well enough that the thought that it might in fact all depend on us would drive us straight to fasting and trembling prayer. I’m grateful that in the creation of the small cultural good that is this book, I’ve tasted both that kind of work and that kind of prayer.



I hope that most people who read this book will read it together with someone else. One of the most mysterious and beautiful things about culture is that it has to be shared. I can walk out alone into the wilderness, and from time to time I should. But I am never alone in culture. I am always accompanied by those who created it before me and share it with me; I can never really escape my responsibility to those who come after me, whose horizons of possibility I will move in some way, for better or worse.

I hope friends will read this book and begin to envision their friendships not just as the companionship of compatible individuals but as potentially transformative partnerships in the places where they live, study, work and play.

I hope families will read this book and discover that the family, so seemingly insignificant in an age of technology and celebrity, is still the heart of culture, the primary place where most of us are called to cultivate and create.

I hope churches will read this book and take the risky path of celebrating their members who do not go into “full-time Christian service” but who serve Christ full time in their own arena of culture.

I hope that those with evident cultural power will read this book and discover God’s purpose for their power; I hope that those who feel small and neglected in the world will discover that God has something great for them to do, that they are not forgotten but are at the very center of his plan, the heroes of his surprise ending.

It could seem like a book about culture is likely somehow to be a book about us—about what we do, what we accomplish, our ambitions and dreams and schemes.

I hope that when you finish this book, you will have discovered that culture is not finally about us, but about God.

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