

Hot Topics
Pop Goes the Christian: Culture

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Digging Deeper (Questions are on the last page)

Hot Topics: Pop Goes the Christian: Culture

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Background Notes

Key Scripture Texts: 1 John 2:15-17

Introduction

“What shall I compare the kingdom of God to? It is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough” (Luke 13:20, 21).

The question begged by this statement of Jesus is, "What's the yeast?" In the context of Jesus' time, the whole notion of "yeast" had a host of negative meanings, not the least of which was its presumed equation to sin and defilement. Passover began with removal of yeast from the household and the making of bread without yeast — unleavened bread. No doubt Jesus thought about such associations when he crafted his provocative statement that "the kingdom of God" is *like* yeast. In effect he is telling his audience not get hung-up on a single, bad meaning for yeast but also consider a positive one. After all, Jewish people, on other occasions baked bread *with yeast*, and only omitted it in honor of their forebears who left Egypt in such a hurry that they had no time to wait for the bread to rise, but ate it without leaven instead (see Exodus 12). Later, used as a metaphor, yeast became symbol of the pervasive influence of sin and evil within society.

What Jesus seems to be doing with the same imagery is to remind people that God's kingdom is *also in the process of influencing society*, and that God's intention is for His will to "work all through" the world until it is done "on earth as it is in heaven." The presenting question is simply, what will be the agent of influence and what will be its object?

Is the gospel really counter cultural?¹ Is there a subversive, revolutionary, unruly aspect to the gospel of Jesus Christ? There was in the first century. The acids of the gospel message went to work on slavery, power structures, violence, gender inequities, prejudice, religion, marital roles and relationships, and popular morality. The gospel contained explosive ideas back then. The early Christians hurled volatile notions of brotherhood, humility, love, forgiveness, and sacrifice across the battlements of a hardened and fortified culture.

Ultimately, a gospel that is counter-cultural is a gospel that subverts little things—attitudes, habits, ideas, relationships—at the level of the individual. The culture wars are fought one person at a time, one heart at a time.

Consider: A society's "culture" is a set of shared practices, attitudes, values, and beliefs which are rooted in common understandings of "the big questions"—where life comes from, what life means, who we are, and what is important to spend our time doing in the years allotted to us. No one can live without some assumed answers to these questions, and every set of answers shapes culture:

- the way we treat the material world,
- the way we relate the individual to the group and family,
- the way groups and classes relate to one another,
- the way we handle sex, money, and power,

¹ Tim Woodroof, "Christian Counter Culture," *TheLookOut.com*, <http://www.lookoutmag.com/articles/culture.asp?id=437>.

- the way we make decisions and set priorities, and the way we regard death, time, art, government, and physical space.

Culture becomes a "filter" for seeing and understanding the world.² Narrowing culture down to "pop" culture, we are invariably dealing with entertainment, art and mass media. That is, the aspect of culture found in what people look at, read, listen to, surf, buy, play with, drive past, browse, eat, or touch.³ More importantly, pop culture *shapes the lives* of its consumers, functioning as both a mirror and spotlight: telling us who we are and what we might want to become. Found in the values of this culture are people's needs, frustrations, hopes, and desires.

Today an astonishing array of movements, political action groups, social activist networks, foundations, think tanks, experts, writers, artists, as well as religious leaders are all intentionally working for cultural change—and working in extremely different and often contradictory directions. Christians, of course, would love to see their society reflect more and more of the Father's justice, of the Son's sacrificial love, and of the Spirit's life-giving power. How exactly should Christians 'relate Christ to culture' so this happens?

Historically, Christians have adopted three classic approaches that are still in use today. We could call "the conversionist", "the political", and "the separatist" ways.

- The conversionist - On the one hand, many believe that the way to change a culture is to change enough individual hearts through personal conversion. Then, supposedly, the culture would change automatically.
- The political - At the other end of the spectrum there have been believers over the centuries who wanted to use political power to enact laws that were directly based on Christian theology.
- The separatist - A third approach rejects any idea of Christians trying to influence culture. It insists that we should reflect Christian values within our own churches, but we should not try to influence society in any particularly Christian direction.

Each of these positions provides such telling critiques of its rival views that we must conclude there is no utopian way to create a Christian society. You could certainly make a case that there has never been a Christian society (even though many have claimed to be) and there never will be. And yet, Christians cannot simply rest satisfied with individual conversions or separated enclaves when they discern the central plot-line of the Bible:

1. God created a world of peace and life;
2. The world has fallen into a state of injustice and brokenness;
3. God has determined to redeem this world through the work of his Son and the creation of a new humanity;
4. Until eventually the world is renewed and restored to being the way that he made it and the way we all want. In short, the purpose of redemption is not to help individuals escape the world. It is about the coming of God's kingdom to renew it. God's purpose is not only to save individuals, but also to make a new world based on justice, peace, and love, rather than on power, strife, and selfishness. If God is so committed to this that he suffered and died, surely Christians should also seek a society based on God's peace and love.

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² Tim Stevens has written extensively about this function in his book *Pop Goes the Church*, Power Publishing, 2008.

³ Writing from a pastoral perspective is Bill Burchitt who has captured key ideas on popular culture and the church in his article, "Can You Hear Me Now?", *Message of the Open Bible*, September/October, 2008, p. 6.

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This Week's Main Text: 1 John 2:15-17

15 Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. 16 For all that is in the world- the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride in possessions- is not from the Father but is from the world. 17 And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever.

What is "the world"?

The ordinary sense of "world" is simply the planet on which we live or the aggregate of persons who live on it. Such expressions as "The world is watching!" or "The world is round" capture such meanings. Occasionally, the term suggests a hostile majority which overpowers a victimized minority, in which case it's the "big bad world" at war with some disenfranchised group. This might also merge with the notion of conformity or the pressure to conform.

Certain religious connotations have attached themselves to the term, commonly in the form "worldly" or "worldliness." Believers in the Gospel have, on occasion, found themselves marginalized within a larger dominant society whose values they do not share and whose own values they imagine are under siege.

A Word about the World (*kosmos*).

The term *kosmos* commonly refers to the organized structure of human beings. As such it is a power in opposition to the kingdom of God. It is associated with "the present evil age" from which the Christ followers have been delivered (1:4).

Throughout the Gospels, we read about the *kosmos* in its hostility to Jesus, God's son, starting with his temptation by Satan who showed him "all the kingdoms of the *kosmos*" (Matthew 4:8). Jesus and his followers were "light" in the darkness of the *kosmos* (Matthew 5:14; John 8:12; 12:46). Human beings may gain the whole *kosmos* and lose their souls (Matthew 16:26; Luke 9:25). It is the place where "temptations to sin" arise (Matthew 18:7), but it is also the place where the Gospel goes with the message of God's love (Matthew 26:13).

According to John's Gospel, God's "Word", Jesus the Christ, comes into this *kosmos* (1:9) but the *kosmos* does not recognize him., though he comes to take away the sin of the *kosmos* (1:29), having been loved by God (3:16). The *kosmos* hates God's son (7:7), though he comes, not to condemn it, but to save it (3:17-19). Jesus calls those among the Jewish leadership who oppose him "of the *kosmos*", while he is not (8:23). Ultimately, Jesus' work on the cross meant "judgment" for the *kosmos* and its "prince" (Satan) (12:31; 14:30). Still, Jesus' final purpose was not to "judge" the *kosmos* but to save it (12:47). Sadly, the *kosmos* is unable to accept God's gift of the Spirit (14:17). To the *kosmos* Jesus offers a peace which the *kosmos* cannot give (14:27). John uses

kosmos more than sixty times in his Gospel, revealing both the conflict between God and the *kosmos* and yet God's persistent efforts to save it in spite of its opposition to His purposes.

In Paul's letters, *kosmos* is the place where the Gospel goes forth (Romans 1:8; Colossians 1:6; 1 Timothy 3:16). The term appears in some passages as equivalent to God's "created order of things" (Romans 1:20; Ephesians 1:4--"the foundation of the *kosmos*"=the creation of the *kosmos*), though now it falls under His judgment (Romans 3:6, 19) as a result of human sin (Romans 5:12). God's covenant partner, Abraham, was made "heir to the *kosmos*" (Romans 4:13). Though ruled by sin, the *kosmos* is destined to be reconciled to God (Romans 11:15; 2 Corinthians 5:19). The *kosmos* has its own "wisdom" which looks foolish to God and which He counters with the preaching of the Gospel (1 Corinthians 1:20, 27-28; 3:19). The *kosmos* is energized by a spirit which stands opposed to the Spirit of God (1 Corinthians 2:12). The Christ followers are placed into the "arena" ("made a spectacle") by the *kosmos* because they believe the Gospel (1 Corinthians 4:9, 13).

One day the *kosmos* will be judged by God (1 Corinthians 11:32). By God's grace, the followers of Jesus have confidence as they live godly lives in the *kosmos* (2 Corinthians 1:12). Before persons come to Christ for salvation, they are slaves to the *kosmos* (Galatians 4:3; Colossians 2:8, 20). The *kosmos* has its own "way of life" under the rule of the "prince" who works in the hearts of those who refuse to obey God (Ephesians 2:2). Separation, alienation, estrangement, hopelessness and godlessness mark life in the *kosmos* (Ephesians 2:12). Crooked and twisted, the *kosmos* stands in need of the light brought by God's children who live lives that are blameless, innocent, and without blemish (Ephesians 2:15). Christ came into the *kosmos* to save sinners (1 Timothy 1:15). For the followers of Christ, the *kosmos* holds no treasure which can be taken into the life to come (1 Timothy 6:7).

One particularly insightful passage is Romans 12:1-2, particularly because it contrasts two distinct ways for influencing human beings:

I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. 2 Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

These "ways" of influence are: 1) "conform", and 2) "transform." Paul selects two different Greek words to express each idea.

1. "Conform" comes from the verb *suschēmātizomai* which also includes the meanings "shaped by, live after the pattern of." Conformity implies an innate passivity during the process. Persons undergoing conformation *allow themselves* to be molded by the agency of something outside themselves. J.B. Phillips, in his classic translation of the New Testament, rendered 12:2 in this way: "Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mould."⁴ During the course of conformity, the individual loses something of her own autonomy and ceases to be entirely "her own person." There is an implied slavery to the agent of conformity. We are no longer dealing with "free wills" acting as agents for their own good but captive wills acting for the good of someone else. Such persons are "used" by another, not through conjunctive engagement, but by mindless containment. A certain *schema* or plan exists within the fashion and culture of the "world," and persons conformed to that schema are fulfilling the purpose of the schema largely apart from their continuing choice. We often hear Christians tell non-Christians, "God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life." Contrast that with, "The world loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life."

This is reminiscent of Søren Kierkegaard's reflections on the nature of human freedom and choice. He once wrote that if persons do not choose on their own initiative — if they delay their choice and become passive — others will step in and choose for them.⁵ Conformity to culture results in a society of non-thinking, non-choosing persons.

⁴ J.B. Phillips, *The New Testament in Modern English*, Geoffrey Bles Ltd., 1959.

⁵ Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, vol.III, tr. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton University Press, 1987, pp. 163-164.

2. "Transform" originates in the Greek verb *metamorphoōmai*, from which easily derives our English word "metamorphosis," that biological process by which the internal dynamics of an organism cause it to pass through dramatic stages of development (i.e. larva, pupa, adult). Key ideas in this process are "conspicuous and relatively abrupt change." More importantly is the source of this change: realities *internal to the organism* as opposed to those external to it. Paul uses a wonderful figure of speech which speaks to the Holy Spirit's continuing work of shaping our inner life and habits so that we have both the mind and the conduct of Christ Jesus consistently lived out in our lives. The power for this change is not the constraints from without but the potential from within. Through natural spontaneity, organisms like the butterfly realize their true natures. In a similar fashion, the Christian life emerges from the crises of the new birth and sanctification to the maturing life of the Spirit.

According to Paul, "the world" (here a translation of the Greek word *aiōn* = "the age in which we live") does not define who we are culturally, nor in any other way. Our definition as new beings in Christ arrives through the "renewal of our minds." At the minimum, the word mind (Greek *nous*) refers to the entirety of our inner life, and not to just that aspect which thinks or reasons. While the classical Greek usage includes the ideas of "mind, perception," it encompasses much more. Foremost are the concepts of "sensibility, purpose, intention, and meaning." For example, the Greek sentence, *ti soi en voō esti poein* ("What do you intend to do?"), uses the word for "mind" in the sense of "choice, intention, and will." Thus, when Paul says "be transformed by the renewal of your mind," he may well be saying that the agent for the renewal is a conscious choice and intention of the *mind* — something internal to the Christian as opposed to what is external (the culture, the world).

The word "renew" is from *anakainōsis*, and tends to mean "restore," as in the restoration of our genuine humanity made in God's image, and made possible by the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Whereas the culture can have a denigrating and demeaning influence on our humanity — making us less than human — the process of spiritual renewal, actively the outcome of our free choice to do the will of God restores our humanity. The damage done by fallen humanity is overcome in restored humanity.

Knowing the will of God is the goal, Paul tells us. In the heat of contemporary culture, we ought always to be aware of whose will we are doing. If we are not doing our own, are we doing God's or some other alien will, perhaps driven by pop culture or slick advertising or shrewd marketing. Watching a movie or reading a novel are, in themselves, mere perceptual events. But allowing their messages to shape how we think or act is to surrender ourselves to the will of another and not to God. We can certainly learn about the culture from reading or viewing such things, but we should never do so ignorant of their authors' intentions. Culturally, we ought never to make another's will our own unless it accords with the will of God. Since pop culture is a powerful influence in our world, we ought to filter culture and not passively allow culture to filter us! We ought to become astute moderators of cultural strategies as they impinge on our lives. Each time we see, hear or feel a message from cultural media, we ought to ask the simple question, "What does this thing want from us or for us?" And then without delay trail that question with this one: "Does God's will agree with this cultural intention?"

In summary, we can say the following things about the New Testament use of *kosmos* (adapted from *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, Bauer, Danker, Arndt, and Gingrich (a.k.a. *BDAG*)):

1. that which serves to beautify through decoration, adornment, adorning
2. condition of orderliness, orderly arrangement, order
3. the sum total of everything here and now, the world, the (orderly) universe, in philosophical usage
4. the sum total of all beings above the level of the animals, the world
5. planet earth as a place of inhabitation, the world
 - a. generally
 - b. the world as the habitation of humanity
 - c. earth, world in contrast to heaven

6. humanity in general, the world
 - a. generally
 - b. of all humanity, but especially of believers, as the object of God's love
7. the system of human existence in its many aspects, the world
 - a. as scene of earthly joys, possessions, cares, sufferings
 - b. the world, and everything that belongs to it, appears as that which is hostile to God, i.e. lost in sin, wholly at odds with anything divine, ruined and depraved
8. collective aspect of an entity, totality, sum total

In the case of 1 John, and consistent with the teaching of Romans 12:1-2, we are dealing here with definition 7b: "The world, and everything that belongs to it; appears as that which is hostile to God, i.e. lost in sin, wholly at odds with anything divine, ruined and depraved." At the same time, the nuance of "organized world" is also present. The New Testament discerns within the human society a sinister aspect which is organized and orchestrated in its opposition to God. Satan is present in and through the world system, shaping its exploitive strategies and tempting Christians to buy into its false rewards. Remember the temptations of Jesus in the wilderness which includes, among other things, seeing the kingdoms of this world as his only as he bows down and worships Satan. That is, influence in the ultimate sense (power) is seen as deriving, not from free choice or acceptance of God's will, but submission to an alien power. We can accurately say that succumbing to cultural values not in accord with God's will is loss of freedom and concession to the order of Satan himself.

What Do We Love?

To the great credit of the New Testament, it uses a Greek word for "love" which, in its original form, was so empty of specific meaning that it allowed generous room for fresh meaning to occupy its space. Into this word group, *agapē* (noun) and *agapaō* (verb), the writers poured the unselfish, self-giving and incomparable *love of God*. This is love whose subject (and not object) is God. True, we are commanded to love God in this way, but unapologetically, the writers declare: "Not that we loved God, but that He loved us..." (1 John 4:10). In the truest sense, the sort of love meant by *agapē* cannot begin with us: we are powerless to initiate or even sustain this sort of love. The clarity of 1 John 4:19 reaffirms this: "We love because he first loved us." From the teaching of Jesus we hear more about the generative nature of *agapē*-love, deriving its existence from the love of Jesus: "Love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another" (John 13:34; also, 15:12). A cause and effect relationship obtains between Jesus loving us and our loving each other.

Similar themes flow from 1 John 4:7, "Let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God." The phrase "love is from God" in the Greek reads, *hē agapē ek tou theou estin*, where the preposition *ek* denotes *source* or *origin*. Incidentally, the writer of this text associates love with a form of "knowing" — a form which carries us beyond mere intellectual grasping or understanding and plunges us deeply into a relationship with God. Notice how the sort of love described derives from the experience of the new birth — that first most important transformational event included in Paul's statement in Romans 12:2 (above) which involves "the renewal of our mind."

What are the intrinsic marks of *agapē* love? As we noted above, the word *agapē* had minimum content within the universe of words available to the New Testament writers. However, there were at least three other terms referring to some feature of the human love experience. Each one reflects a distinctive culturally conditioned aspect of love, and helps us appreciate the power of the newly formed idea contained in *agapē*. Among the literary "greats" addressing the various words is C.S. Lewis in his classic work, *The Four Loves*.⁶

Affection

⁶ Published by Harvest Books, 1960. Our comments here are taken from a concise *Wikipedia* article, fact checked for accuracy of content: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Four_Loves.

Affection (*storgē*) is fondness through familiarity, especially between family members or people who have otherwise found themselves together by chance. It is described as the most natural, emotive, and widely diffused of loves: natural in that it is present without coercion; emotive because it is the result of fondness due to familiarity; and most widely diffused because it pays the least attention to those characteristics deemed "valuable" or worthy of love and, as a result, is able to transcend most discriminating factors. Ironically, its strength, however, is what makes it vulnerable. Affection has the appearance of being "built-in" or "ready made", says Lewis, and as a result people come to expect, even to demand, its presence—irrespective of their behavior and its natural consequences.

Friendship

Friendship (*philia*) is a strong bond existing between people who share a common interest or activity. Lewis explicitly says that his definition of friendship is narrower than mere companionship: friendship in his sense only exists if there is something for the friendship to be "about". He calls Companionship or Clubbability a matrix for friendship, as friendship can rise in the context of both. Friendship is the least natural of loves, states Lewis; i.e., it is not biologically necessary to progeny like either affection (e.g., rearing a child), *erōs* (e.g., creating a child), or charity (e.g., providing for a child). It has the least association with impulse or emotion. In spite of these characteristics, it was the belief of the ancients, (and Lewis himself), that it was the most admirable of loves because it looked not at the beloved (like *erōs*, see below), but towards that "about"—that thing because of which the relationship was formed. This freed the participants in this friendship from self-consciousness.

Eros

Eros (*erōs*) is love in the sense of 'being in love'. This is distinct from sexuality, which Lewis calls Venus, although he does spend time discussing sexual activity and its spiritual significance in both a pagan and a Christian sense. He identifies *erōs* as indifferent. This is good because it promotes appreciation of the beloved regardless of any pleasure that can be obtained from them. It can be bad, however, because this blind devotion has been at the root of many of history's most abominable tragedies. In keeping with his warning that "love begins to be a demon the moment [it] begins to be a god", he warns against the danger of elevating *eros* to the status of a god.

Agapē

Agapē is the love that brings forth caring regardless of circumstance. Lewis recognizes this as the greatest of loves, and sees it as a specifically Christian virtue. The chapter on the subject focuses on the need of subordinating the natural loves to the love of God, who is full of *agapē* love. Lewis states that "He is so full, in fact, that it overflows, and He can't help but love us." Lewis metaphorically compares love with a garden, *agapē* with the gardening utensils, the lover as the gardener, and God as the elements of nature. God's love and guidance act on our natural love (that cannot remain what it is by itself) as the sun and rain act on a garden: without either, the object (metaphorically the garden; realistically love itself) would cease to be beautiful or worthy. Lewis warns that those who exhibit *agapē* must constantly check themselves that they do not flaunt—and thereby warp—this love ("But when you give to someone, don't tell your left hand what your right hand is doing."—Matthew 6:3), which is its potential threat.

To this helpful outline of the four loves, we also need to stress the uniqueness of *agapē* as "love-of-the-will." This means that such love is a choice and not merely a feeling or inclination. In time choices become habits, and when they do, we speak, as did the Greeks like Aristotle, about the formation of *virtue*. However, in the case of *agapē*, whose author or source is God Himself, having the virtue comes from freely choosing to accept God's love, reciprocate back to God, and reflect outward to others. We might consider such love to be like an angled mirror whereby the glory of God's love is directed into the world where it can have its most effective restorative result. Within the world of Hebrew thought, we are likely to encounter the word *hesed*, often translated as "lovingkindness." Like *agapē* it contains the essence of "choice," but applied specifically to

Yahweh's commitment to keep covenant with His people and the expectation that they will keep covenant with Him. Once more, love-as-choice emerges as the distinctive sense of the word.

Having grounded love in the God's initial work for us, we are now in a position to evaluate the sobering command found in 1 John 2:15, "love not the world" and its associated implications. Several key points need outlining.

1. The word for "love" as applied to the "world" is the same word used elsewhere in *1 John* applied to that which is suppose to originate from God. Already there is an intentional incongruity in using *agapē* as an act directed toward "the world," where "world" refers to that which is hostile toward God. Applying a word meant to describe God's love for humanity and their choice to love as He loves — applying such a word to the "world" (organized society hostile to God) is almost completely unthinkable. Yet, the writer quite intentionally is telling his readers that they are not to love the world with such intentional choice, such unconditional love, as would only be appropriate in their relationship with God.
2. Further, this love extends not only to the world (*kosmos*) but to "the things in the world." Why does the writer add this as an additional object of affection? Probably because he wants to make specific the true identity of worldliness. In the case of "the world," the emphasis falls on the whole system which stands in opposition to God and under the rule of Satan. Whereas "the things in the world" focuses on the cultural elements which comprise the world, as well as the human experiences which connect us to the world. A description of these experiences follows.
3. "All that is in the world" is the general statement which is then broken down into its practical components:
 - a. **The Lust of the Flesh** (Greek: *hē epithumia tēs sarkos*). Used here and in the next phrase, the word "lust" is actually the Greek term for strong desire, something which human beings want with great intensity, and which they imagine they cannot live without. In classical usage it has the connotation of "longing after" something. The verb root is *epithuō* which means "to strive vehemently." Curiously, a related series of words mean "to offer incense," and point to a special form of desire which finds expression in a religious ritual practice. That is, persons want something with such urgency, that they will offer incense to rouse the gods to meet their needs. In the book of *James*, a warning is made about such an illegitimate use of prayer:

2 You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. 3 You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions (James 4:2-3).

The clause, "you desire and do not have," is based on the word *epithumia*, and the line of argument developed in the passage suggests that persons who "ask" wrongly do so in prayer, perhaps with incense in the ritualistic sense implied by the classical verb forms. In this case, religious forms comprise an aspect of culture which stands in opposition to God. The combination of desire unfulfilled, leading to murder; coveting without possession, resulting in fighting and quarrels; asking without receiving, focused on passion — this combination is deadly and the creature of human nature in desperation, the product of a culture which never has enough.

"Flesh" (*sarx*) largely refers to human beings in their weakness, brokenness, frailty, fallenness, and separation from God. It does not merely identify the physical dimension of human life, but rather the whole of human life in its finiteness. Usually, flesh and Spirit stand in contrast in the New Testament, and represent two sources for living one's life or having one's being in the world.

Persons who derive their existence from strong desire bent on meeting the immediate cravings of mortal human life betray the one-sidedness of that existence. They show themselves one-dimensional beings, absent the life of the Spirit and the will of God.

- b. **The Lust of Eyes** (Greek: *hē epithumia tōn ophthalmōn*). "Eyes" adds the dimension of external things to the innate self-driven desires of the human heart. Popular culture appeals to both, but when the media

of popular culture enters the eye-gate, new desires are born — perhaps ones that did not spring to life before. One strategy of "the world" is not merely to cater to existing desires, but also to create new ones. Marketing not only sells to the prurient interests of their target audience, it also provokes and invents new "needs" which falsely present themselves as belonging to normal human need. It's one thing to be enticed by one's own desires, but another to have foreign desire grafted on.

To such extrinsic desires, the counsel of Scripture is clear: "My son, if sinners entice you, do not consent" (Proverbs 1:10). The key words are "entice" and "consent." Faced with the lure of popular culture intent on manipulation by visual representation, the people of God must simply refuse to collude with consent to the allurement.

- c. **The Pride of Life** (Greek: *hē alazoneia tou biou*). Abruptly, the word "pride" replaces "lust," as the writer adopts the Greek word *alazoneia*. But this is not the common word for pride or *hubris*. Its meaning is much more defined: "false pretension, imposture, quackery. Classical writers, like Plato, apply the term to the Sophists, persons who made a show of wisdom but had double motives in their use of words and language ("Sophistry"). The connection to *pride* is the frequent inflation or exaggeration of one's ability often found in those who want to bend others to their will. Consider the methods of popular culture: misrepresent the nature of the happy life by suggesting that this or that article of commerce can fulfill human beings. "Buy our product and you will be..." Often the association is visual; at other times it is an appeal to a possible change in future fortunes.

We also have the use of *bios*, often translated as "life," used in conjunction with *alazoneia*. Some translators prefer the rendering, "possessions," as this is a common meaning behind *bios*. If we combine the two meanings for these Greek words, the resulting idea is the false pretension which comes from possessions. Need we say more? The use of material possessions as symbols of status and the markers for achievement is commonplace. Ownership of things, when it defines us, becomes a new form of seduction by the world. Once things define us, we lose ourselves in something external to us. And this is precisely what Paul meant when he wrote about being "conformed to this world." Popular culture can, if given permission, define who we are by our consumption of its goods and services. The loss of self in things belongs to what the writer means by "pride of life."

If "lust" seems grimly seductive, the pretension of material things changes the role from passive to active, from victim to agent of the deception. Creators of popular culture are doubly responsible for the deceptions perpetrated in the name of human happiness. They know full well what they are doing, and why they are doing it. By manipulating material possessions to define themselves and others, they in effect become re-inventors of what it means to be human. And there is something especially unnerving about knowing that popular culture is re-inventing the human race!

4. "The love of the Father is not in him." This sentence allows for two possible meanings. On the one hand, the writer might mean our love *for God* is absent from our hearts when we "love the world." In this case, the emphasis falls on *agapē* as our reciprocation of God's love. But the genitive case (*tou patros*) also has another meaning in this context, whereby "the Father" is the agent and love is the action. That is, because we love the world, we crowd out every effort of the Father to love us. Indeed, we commit a double sin by allowing the world to manufacture a false love — a disguise behind which all manner of cultural deception takes place. Do we actually enjoy being deceived, manipulated and used by a worldly system which does not act in our own best interest but in its own instead? Would we really wish to exchange the unconditional love of our heavenly Father which has our best interest in mind for such a preposterous fabrication foisted on us by a degenerate popular culture?
5. The three-fold aspect of the world (flesh, eyes, possessions) and the whole system which the world represents are "passing away." By contrast, "the one doing the will of God," that active agent of transformation, "abides forever." The Greek has a strong contrastive particle introducing this clause: *de*.

The contrast is between "passing away" (*paraagō*) and "abides forever" (*menei eis ton aiōna*). One possible meaning of the first verb is simply "to disappear." But the range of meanings is even more revealing: "to lead by or past a place, to lead aside, to mislead, to be induced (passive form)." The idea of "to lead" is present in the basic root, *agō*. When prefixed with *para*, the verb assumes the added idea of "to mislead." Ironically, those very desires and misrepresentations which the world fosters are self-deluded. Planning to manipulate others, the world itself passes away precisely because it is mistaken about itself.

Always in the shadows and in control of the world's tactics and stratagems is the archenemy of God. He too is self-deluded. Though defeated by Christ on the cross and cast out of heaven, he continues to act as if he can actually made progress in his war with God. Scripture suggests that his energy derives from his resentment for having lost to the risen Christ. "Full of wrath" is how Revelation 12:12 characterizes his present mental state in relationship to the earth and human beings.

In what ways does culture derive its driving passions from a universe of resentment? How is "spite" the fuel for certain aspects of popular culture?

Disordered Love: St. Augustine

If loving the world involves three misplaced affections, how does such renegade love come to suffuse culture? In answering that question, we turn to the wisdom of St. Augustine, 4th century philosopher and devout Christian thinker. He deeply believed that human beings bore the image of God. God had so formed His highest creations with a deep need for Himself that they would never attain true happiness without loving God above all else. Yet, human beings regularly choose to love things which cannot truly fulfill human expectations. Supposing that material values like money, power and fame are capable of meeting the essential human needs, people choose to love these rather than love God. What they discover is that this misplaced love results in deep disappointment and the emergence of something Augustine called "disordered love." Looked at in modern terms, this love for lesser things leads to all sorts of human pathologies and to the fragmentation of life into a myriad of disconnected affections. In effect, human beings expect more from the objects of their love than those objects can deliver.

The soul becomes seriously disfigured by loving things more than those things can do for human beings. The result is envy, greed, jealousy, trickery, panic and restlessness. Soon disordered love produces disordered persons, and in turn a disordered society. Only by restoration of individual human lives through the love of God can the consequential chaos be overcome.

Whole cultures are shaped by values which love things more than love God. Central to such cultures is a sense of self-sufficiency: physically, emotionally and spiritually. These originate from pride and an overconfidence that finite objects can fulfill infinite need.

Culture Interaction: Examples from the Bible

We have a working model of culture and God's people in the life of Israel. Four hundred years of sojourn in the land of Egypt left their mark on the descendants of Jacob (Israel). When God originally called Abraham, He determined to shape a godly culture in the midst of a fallen world. This was to become a prototype people. But once they absorbed the cultural values of a pagan society, it was inevitable for them to reproduce that culture after they left Egypt. Ironically, God presented His people with a fresh cultural task: to build a tabernacle, an earthly object which reflected true heavenly realities.

The Golden Calf and the Tabernacle: Cultural Contrasts⁷

Chapters 31-39 of Exodus provide a unique perspective of culture and God's involvement with it. On one hand the work of man was blessed through the artistry of Bezalel, Oholiab, and other skilled artisans as they

⁷ Jerry Solomon of Probe Ministries suggests many of the ideas found in this section of our notes.

cooperated to build the tabernacle (35-39). On the other hand, the work of disordered love in the form of the golden calf was rejected by God (31-34). This contrast serves to suggest a guideline with which we can begin to judge culture.

Chapter 31:1-11 contains God's initial instructions to Moses concerning the building of the tabernacle in the wilderness. Two important artisans, Bezalel and Oholiab, are recognized by God as being especially gifted for this work. These men were skilled, creative people who were able to contribute significantly to the religious/cultural life of the nation of Israel. But at this point in the narrative the scene changes dramatically. While Moses was on the mountain with God, the people became impatient and decided to make a god, an idol. This prompted an enraged response from both God and Moses. The end result was tragic: three thousand were slain as a result of their idolatry. Then the attention of the people was directed toward the building of the tabernacle. Chapters 35-39 contain detailed accounts from God pertaining to the tabernacle, and the subsequent work of the skilled artisans, including Bezalel and Oholiab. The finished product was blessed (39:42-43).

In this brief survey of a portion of Israel's history we have seen two responses to the work of man's hands: one negative, the other positive. The people fashioned a piece of art, an idol; the response was negative on the part of God and Moses. The people fashioned another piece of art, the tabernacle; the response was positive and worthy of the blessing of both God and Moses. Why the difference in judgment? The answer is deceptively simple: the intent of the art was evaluated. And it was not a matter of one being "secular" and the other "sacred." Art, the cultural product, was not the problem. "Just as art can be used in the name of the true God, as shown in the gifts of Bezalel, so it can be used in an idolatrous way, supplanting the place of God and thereby distorting its own nature."⁸

Art is certainly a vital element of culture. As a result, we should take the lessons of Exodus 31-39 to heart. Our evaluation of culture should include an awareness of intent without being overly sensitive to form. If not, we begin to assign evil incorrectly. As Carl F.H. Henry says, "The world is evil only as a fallen world. It is not evil intrinsically."⁹ These insights have focused on certain observers of cultural objects as seen in art: God, Moses, and the people of Israel. In the first case God and Moses saw the golden calf from one perspective, the people of Israel from another. In the second case all were in agreement as they observed the tabernacle. The people's perception changed; they agreed with God's intent and aesthetic judgment. The lesson is that our cultural life should be subject to God.

Daniel and His Friends: Encountering A Pagan Culture

The first chapter of Daniel tells of four young men who were transported to a culture other than their own by a conquering nation, Babylonia. Their response to this condition provides us with insights concerning how we should relate to the culture that surrounds us. Daniel, of course, proves to be the central figure among the four. He is the focus of our attention.

Several facets of this chapter should be noted. First, Daniel and his friends were chosen by the king of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar, to serve in his court. They were chosen because of their "intelligence in every branch of wisdom ... understanding ... discerning knowledge ... and ability for serving in the king's court" (v. 4). Second, they were taught "the literature and language of the Chaldeans" (v. 4). Third, Daniel "made up his mind" that he would not partake of the Babylonian food and drink (v. 8). Fourth, "God granted Daniel favor and compassion" with his superiors even though he and his friends would not partake of the food (v. 9-16). Fifth, "God gave them knowledge and intelligence in every branch of literature and wisdom" (v. 17). Sixth, the king found Daniel and his friends to be "ten times better than all the magicians and conjurers who were in all his realm" (v. 20).

⁸ Gene Edward Veith, *The Gift of Art: The Place of the Arts in Scripture*, InterVarsity Press, 1983), p. 31.

⁹ Carl F.H. Henry, *Christian Personal Ethics*, Baker, 1957, p. 420.

This synopsis provides us with several important observations. First, evidently there was no attempt on the part of Daniel and his friends to totally separate themselves from the culture, in particular the educational system of that culture. This was a typical response among the ancient Jews. These young men were capable of interacting with an ungodly culture without being contaminated by it. Christ followers often become paranoid as they live within what is deemed an unchristian culture. Perhaps a lesson can be learned from Daniel concerning a proper response. Of course such a response should be based on wisdom and discernment. That leads us to our second observation.

Second, even though Daniel and his companions learned from the culture, they did so by practicing discernment. They obviously compared what they learned of Babylonian thought with what they already understood from God's point of view. The Law of God was something with which they were well acquainted. Edward Young's comments on v. 17 clarify this: "The knowledge and intelligence which God gave to them ... was of a discerning kind, that they might know and possess the ability to accept what was true and to reject what was false in their instruction."¹⁰ Such perception is greatly needed among Christ followers. A separatist, isolationist mentality creates moral and spiritual vacuums throughout our culture. We should replace those vacuums with ideas that are spawned in the minds of Godly thinkers and doers.

Third, God approved of their condition within the culture and even gave them what was needed to influence it (v. 17). Christ followers may be directed by God to enter a different culture that may not share their world view. Or, they may be directed to enter the culture that surrounds them, which, as with contemporary western culture, can be devoid of the overt influence of a Christian world view. If so, they should do so with an understanding that the Lord will protect and provide. And He will demonstrate His power through them as the surrounding culture responds.

Paul and Corinth

"You're a Corinthian!" If you had heard that exclamation in New Testament times you would know that the person who said it was very upset. To call someone a Corinthian was insulting. Even non-Christians recognized that Corinth was one of the most immoral cities in the known world. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians contains many indications of this. The believers in Corinth were faced with a culture which resembled ours in several ways. It was diverse ethnically, religiously, and philosophically. It was a center of wealth, literature, and the arts. And it was infamous for its blatant sexual immorality. How would Paul advise believers to respond to life in such a city? That question can be answered by concentrating on several principles that can be discovered in Paul's letter. We will highlight only a few of these by focusing on certain terms.

Liberty is a foundational term for Christians entering the culture, but it can be misunderstood easily. This is because some act as if it implies total freedom. But "The believer's life is one of Christian liberty in grace."¹¹ Paul wrote, "All things are lawful for me, but not all things are profitable. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be mastered by anything" (6:12, 10:23). It must be remembered, though, that this liberty is given to glorify God. A liberty that condones sin is another form of slavery. Thus, "Whether ... you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God" (10:31). In addition, we must be aware of how our liberty is observed by non-believers. Again Paul wrote, "Give no offense either to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God" (10:32).

Conscience is another term that figures prominently in how we enter the culture. We must be very sensitive to what it means to defile the conscience. There must be a sensitivity to what tempts us. "The believer who cannot visit the world without making it his home has no right to visit at his weak points."¹² As a result, we need to cultivate the discipline that is needed to respond to the ways the Spirit speaks through our conscience.

¹⁰ Edward J. Young, *The Prophecy of Daniel*, Eerdmans, 1949, p. 48-49.

¹¹ Henry, p. 420.

¹² Henry, p. 428.

Yet another term is **brother**. In particular, we should be aware of becoming a "stumbling block" to the person Paul calls a "weaker brother." This does not mean that we disregard what has been said about liberty. "A Christian need not allow his liberty to be curtailed by somebody else. But he is obliged to take care that that other person does not fall into sin and if he would hurt that other person's conscience he has not fulfilled that obligation."¹³ This requires a special sensitivity to others, which is a hallmark of the Christian life. We can use our liberty to minister in different cultural settings, but we must do so with a keen awareness of the principles we have discussed. When we enter that culture, which is so different from what we normally experience, we must do so by applying the wisdom found in God's Word to the Corinthians.

Paul in Athens

Paul's encounter with Athenian culture (Acts 17:16-34) is illustrative of the manner in which we can dialogue with contemporary culture. His interaction exhibits an ability to communicate with a diversity of the population, from those in the marketplace to the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers. And he exhibits an understanding of the culture, including its literature and art. Paul was relating a model for how we can relate our faith effectively. That is, we must communicate with language and examples that can be understood by our audience.

Verse 16 says that Paul's "spirit was being provoked within him as he was beholding the city full of idols." We should note that the verb translated "provoked" here is the Greek word from which we derive the term *paroxysm*. Paul was highly irritated. In addition, we should note that the verb is imperfect passive, implying that his agitation was a logical result of his Christian conscience and that it was continuous. The idolatry which permeated Athenian culture stimulated this dramatic response. Application: the idolatry of contemporary culture should bring no less a response from us. Materialism, Individualism, Relativism, and Secularism are examples of ideologies that have become idols in our culture.

Verses 17 and 18 refer to several societal groups: Jews, God-fearing Gentiles, Epicurean and Stoic philosophers, as well as the general population, namely "those who happened to be present." Evidently Paul was able to converse with any segment of the population. Application: as alert, thinking, sensitive, concerned, discerning Christians we are challenged to confront our culture in all of its variety and pluralism. It is easier to converse with those who are like-minded, but that is not our only responsibility.

In verse 18 some of the philosophers call Paul an "idle babbler" (i.e., one who makes his living by picking up scraps). Application: we should realize that the Christian world view, in particular the basic tenets of the gospel, will often elicit scorn from a culture that is too often foreign to Christian truth. This should not hinder us from sharing the truth.

The narrative of verses 19-31 indicates that Paul knew enough about Athenian culture to converse with it on the highest intellectual level. He was acutely aware of the "points of understanding" between him and his audience. He was also acutely aware of the "points of disagreement" and did not hesitate to stress them. He had enough knowledge of their literary expressions to quote their spokesmen (i.e., their poets), even though this does not necessarily mean Paul had a thorough knowledge of them. And he called them to repentance. Application: we need to "stretch" ourselves more intellectually so that we can duplicate Paul's experience more frequently. The most influential seats in our culture are too often left to those who are devoid of Christian thought. Such a condition is in urgent need of change.

Paul experienced three reactions in Athens (vv. 32-34). First, "some began to sneer" (v. 32). They expressed contempt. Second, some said "We shall hear you again concerning this" (v. 32). Third, "some men joined him and believed" (v. 34). We should not be surprised when God's message is rejected; we should be prepared when

¹³ F.W. Grosheide, *Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, Eerdmans, 1953, p. 243.

people want to hear more; and we can rejoice when the message falls on fertile soil and bears the fruit of a changed life.

We have seen that Scripture is not silent regarding culture. It contains much by way of example and precept, and we have only begun the investigation. There is more to be done. With this expectation in mind, what have we discovered from the Bible at this stage?

1. In some measure God is responsible for the presence of culture, for He created human beings in such a way that they are culture-producing beings.
2. God holds us responsible for cultural stewardship.
3. We should not fear the surrounding culture; instead, we should strive to contribute to it through God-given creativity, and transform it through dialogue and proclamation.
4. We should practice discernment while living within culture. Fifth, the products of culture should be judged on the basis of intent, not form.
5. God's basic attitude toward culture is that which the apostle Paul articulates in I Corinthians 9:19-22. That is, He views human culture primarily as a vehicle to be used by him and His people for Christian purposes.

The Counsel of Jesus

The following text is a common citation of Jesus' own instruction on the question of culture and his followers:

14 I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. 15 I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. 16 They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world (John 17:14-16).

These words come from Jesus' prayer to his Father on the eve of his death. From them we learn that the disciples remain in the world, that Jesus does not want them removed from the world, but that he desires God's protection of them. Hatred by the world is a given. So is the simple truth that the disciples are "not of the world." Honestly accepting the role of "the evil one" as their adversary, Jesus gives his followers God's word so that the cultural hatred and the forces of the evil one might not compromise them.

Further, we learn from his earlier teaching that Jesus commissioned his followers to serve two distinct functions within a fallen culture:

13 "You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet. 14 "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. 15 Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. 16 In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven (Matthew 5:13-16; see also Mark 9:50; Luke 14:34).

Much like the example of the "yeast" at the beginning of this week's study, this text uses two ordinary things to illustrate a cultural truth.

1. By calling them "salt" (Greek: *halas*), Jesus underscores the disciples' role as *preservers* and *enhancers* of the culture in which they live. Ordinary salt acted as a preservative to meat, as well as the improver of flavor in food. Salt was a symbol for permanence, especially in the making of agreements (covenants). In 2 Chronicles 13:5 the phrase "covenant of salt" (Hebrew: *b^erîth melah*) illustrates this usage. However, there was also a negative meaning for salt, inasmuch as salt was spread over a defeated enemy's land, making the ground unusable for some time (see Ezekiel 16:4).¹⁴ The followers of Jesus also represent God's judgment on the fallenness of human society. As prophets, they speak out against evil and injustice and call for repentance and reform. This, too, is a salt-like function within the culture.
2. Light drives out darkness and helps people find their way in a world of chaos and lostness. Living the holy life models the goodness of God before a watching world, offering an alternative to the pagan culture. Paul

¹⁴ Charles Fensham. "Salt as a Curse in the Old Testament and the Ancient Near East." *The Biblical Archaeologist*, 25:1 (February 1962), p. 48.

also employed this symbol: "Do all things without grumbling or questioning, 15 that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world..." (Philippians 2:14-15).

Concluding Thoughts

In his sweeping historical overview and in-depth analysis of Christianity and popular culture, William Romanowski reaches the following conclusion:

The role of the popular arts, as they have been defined as low culture and by the interests of commercialism, has contributed to industry abuses of its artistic freedom, disregard for the roles it serves other than appeasing corporate investors, and the exploitation of markets. These are good reasons for criticism; another is the industry's lack of inhibition, especially the liberal use of profanity and visceral sexual and violent imagery that can turn movie watching into a roller-coaster ride. When combined with cultural elitism and spiritual denigration, the industry's seemingly iconoclastic portrayals can make it difficult for some to even consider the possibility of a transforming presence in Hollywood. These critics, however have confused the issue by identifying the potentials of the popular arts for service of God and neighbor with the forces of secularism at work in the culture industries.

This has contributed to a refusal on the part of some to acknowledge the importance of popular culture — an attitude that involves willful blindness and even hypocrisy. Entertainment is a crucial part of the world in which we all live. It plays a significant role in shaping how people think about themselves, their relation to others and their place in society. The media are a major source of ideas and knowledge, and young people especially appropriate the media as representing their voice and experiences. But popular culture is ignored in the school curriculum, condemned from the pulpit and blamed for society's ills. Except to denounce it as an enemy of the status quo or to assert the moral credentials of politicians, we too readily avoid engaging with entertainment. This conspicuous neglect of entertainment communicates that it is nothing more than harmless amusement, posing no serious personal or social threat, despite public anxiety to the contrary.

The purpose of education should not be limited to cultural transmission or socialization, for schools can and do serve an important role in equipping and challenging students not only to live in society but indeed to be able to transform it — to critique it, analyze its problems and suggest new directions to pursue in working toward solutions. Our culture and society are unfinished entities, living traditions and conditions that change as we contribute to them, and students need to understand that...

If students are to be transformers of culture, they must be equipped to deal with the world as it exists and be able to envision possibilities for its betterment. To that end, it is important that students be given the critical skills to access any cultural text, literature and audiovisual medium.

Family, schools and faith communities need to assert their presence in the cultural discourse about entertainment. Urging constituencies to join consumer boycotts or support watchdog groups, while these can be effective ways to deal with specific incidents, it is not enough. What is needed is a better understanding of the issues and a sharper, more clearly articulated critique, accompanied by alternatives that can lead to a transformation of our social and cultural landscape.

Educational institutions can respond to concern about entertainment's influence on personal behavior, values and view of the world by shaping people's view of entertainment and its role in their lives. If we can help people enhance their understanding and appreciation of entertainment and develop a critical approach, we can become a society served by the potentials of the entertainment media, instead of one that is in constant fear of being possessed by them.¹⁵

Commenting on how we should evaluate cultural tradition, T.S. Eliot once wrote:

Where that culture is regarded as final, that attempt is made to impose it on younger minds. Where it is viewed as a stage in development, younger minds are trained to receive it and to improve upon it ... We know now that the highest achievements of the past, in art, in wisdom, in holiness, were but "stages in development" which we can

¹⁵ William D. Romanowski, *Pop Culture Wars*, Intervarsity Press, 1996, pp. 337.

teach our springalds to improve upon. We must not train them merely to receive the culture of the past, for that would be to regard the culture of the past as final.¹⁶

In 1951, H. Richard Niebuhr published his seminal work, *Christ and Culture*¹⁷, where he crafted a survey of the many ways of answering the question of how Christ's followers understand their own place in the world. Niebuhr called the subject of this book "the double wrestle of the church with its Lord and with the cultural society with which it lives in symbiosis." And he described various understandings of Christ "against," "of," and "above" culture, as well as Christ "transforming" culture, and Christ in "paradoxical" relation to it. His book remains among the most gripping articulations of what is arguably the most basic ethical question of the Christian faith: how is Christ relevant to the world in which we live now?

Niebuhr writes as a Christian, but this work has meaning beyond the scope of the Christian faith. Here, he analyzes how the sacred can relate to the profane, the spiritual to the mundane. After defining "Christ" (Mediator, involving double movement, from God toward humankind and from humankind toward God) and "Culture" (the artificial, secondary environment that man imposes on the natural), he dedicates a chapter to each of the five ways he sees the sacred and profane relating.

The first of these, "Christ against Culture," focuses on the opposition of the sacred to the profane. He examines the *ekklesia* (Greek word for "church"), or "calling out" inherent in the sacred (that which is set apart, beyond the horizon). He critiques this approach by showing how ultimately it leads to an otherworldly Christianity which can have minimal, if any impact on the world.

Opposed to this is "The Christ of Culture." From this viewpoint, the sacred is discovered in culture. That which is most Christ-like in culture is celebrated, the spiritual teachings which bring persons into community, which find meaning in the "ordinary" take precedence. The danger of this approach, is that belief will merge with society, and the sacred will be, eventually, completely lost.

Adherents to the "Christ above Culture" motif compartmentalize the sacred and the profane. Christ is for church and bed-time prayers, culture is the realm of business. At best, spiritually informed morals guide behavior in culture. By compartmentalizing the sacred as separate from the profane, this approach de-vitalizes the profane and dis-empowers the sacred.

The "Christ in Paradox with Culture" approach sees man as sinful and grounded in culture. Man cannot escape the profane--this is part of his nature. Christ, on the other hand, calls man into the sacred. This is the paradox--called to the sacred, a part of the profane. The only resolution is seen as God's redeeming grace.

His final approach considers "Christ the Transformer of Culture." He presents the permeation of all life by the immanent presence of divinity. This lays an onus upon the believer to manifest the Divine within culture, leading to both spiritual and practical, political and social action.

§

When Mark Noll published his ground-breaking work, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, he summarized his analysis with these words:

The search for a Christian perspective on life — on our families, our economies, our leisure activities, our sports, our attitudes to the body and to health care, our reactions to novels and paintings, as well as our churches and our specifically Christian activities — is not just an academic exercise. The effort to think like a Christian is rather an effort to take seriously the sovereignty of God over the world he created, the lordship of Christ over the world he died to redeem, and the power of the Holy Spirit over the world he sustains each and every moment. From this

¹⁶ T.S. Eliot, *Notes Toward a Definition of Culture*, Harcourt Brace, 1949, p. 111.

¹⁷ H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, Harper and Row, 1956.

perspective the search for a mind that truly thinks like a Christian takes on ultimate significance, because the search for a Christian mind is not, in the end, a search for mind but a search for God.¹⁸

Yeast, salt, light. Simple images with profound significance for 21st century Christians. Though our citizenship is in heaven, we belong to countless colonies of heaven on earth where the values of God's kingdom encounter those of contemporary culture. Effective communication requires that we sift through the raw material of that culture to discover useful entry points, bridges, and cross-connections which will allow the message of the Gospel to travel all available pathways to reach human hearts. Or, as Paul once wrote, "I have become all things to all people in order that I might by all means save some" (1 Corinthians 9:22). For a formerly strict traditional Pharisee that was an enormous concession! Working between cultures, Paul made considerable adjustments of his sensibilities. But he learned from experience the difference between message and medium; between Christ and communications. His goal was to bring all things into obedience to Christ, including every thought and world-view (2 Corinthians 10:5). He knew that the "forms" of this world were passing away (1 Corinthians 7:31), yet recognized that Christ followers would "deal" with the world without being unduly shaped by it.

Entertainments, the arts, and a host of other strands of popular culture belong to the potential repertoire for communicating the Good News. Properly informed by Christian values, such things belong to that collection of experiences described by Paul: "God richly provides us with everything to enjoy" (1 Timothy 6:17). Such things follow the principle "4 For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, 5 for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer" (1 Timothy 4:4-5). That is the task of God's people: to sanctify the culture and then to diffuse it throughout the world. We ought to be the leaders and not the followers, "the head and not the tail" (Deuteronomy 28:13, 44) in matters of cultural expression and excellence.

Glory to God! Amen.

¹⁸ See short bibliography at the beginning of these *Notes*, p. 253.

Digger Deeper: *Hot Topics: Pop Goes the Christian: Culture*
(Bob Brown)

To gain a deeper understanding of *Hot Topics: Pop Goes the Christian Culture*, carefully read the selected passages below. To aid you in your study, we invite you to visit the website <http://notes.chicagofirstnaz.org>, or pick up a copy of the *Background Notes* at the **Information** desk, or from your ABF leader. Now consider the following questions, as you ask the Lord to teach you.

1. As we explore the topic of Christians and culture, read Daniel 1. How did Daniel and his three friends, all Jews in exile, relate to the pagan culture around them? What lessons can we learn from their examples?
2. Israel spent 400 years in Egypt before the Exodus. From Exodus 31-39, we learn about some of their experiences after they were set free from a pagan culture. What two radically different "building projects" appear in these chapters, and how do they illustrate two distinct kinds of culture?
3. Our main text for this week is 1 John 2:15-17. What is the primary command in this passage? Define the word "world" as it is used here. Refer to these texts for additional insight: Matthew 4:8; 5:14; 16:26; 18:7; John 8:12; 12:46; 1 Corinthians 1:20, 27-28; 2:12; 3:19; 2 Corinthians 1:12; Galatians 4:3; Colossians 2:8, 20. What does "the world" have to do with popular culture?
4. What does Paul tell us about "the world" in Romans 12:1-2. What is the difference between being "conformed" and being "transformed"? Which of these is the primary method of popular culture?
5. What are the three main methods used by the world to achieve its goal, according to 1 John 2:15-17? Relate those methods to the influences of the surrounding culture.
6. Contrast "love of the world" with "love of the Father" as these phrases are used in this passage. What is the fundamental "flaw" involved in "loving the world," and how does this play out in our participation with certain cultural practices?
7. Define "lust," keeping in mind its wider application. Compare James 4:2-3 and Proverbs 1:10 in their descriptions of lust. In what ways does the world rely on this capacity within human beings?
8. Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, interacted with a largely pagan culture. Two cities he visited posed special challenges in this regard: Corinth and Athens. Using the following passages, discuss his strategy for engaging, criticizing, and improving culture in those places:
 - a. Corinth (1 Corinthians 6:12; 10:23, 31-32)
 - b. Athens (Acts 17:16-34)
9. What general principle did Paul give to guide the relationships we have with our culture (see Philippians 2:14-15)?
10. Jesus used three distinct symbols for describing the influence his followers should have on their respective cultures. Consult the following texts and list those symbols: Luke 13:20-21; Matthew 5:13-16. Explain the appropriateness of each symbol. In what ways do these symbols apply to our cultural situation?
11. Using John 17:14-16, discuss the relationship Jesus wanted his followers to have with the world.
12. Discuss the favorable interactions we can have with our culture if we follow biblical guidelines. Use the following passages to elaborate your answer: 1 Corinthians 9:22; 2 Corinthians 10:5; 1 Timothy 4:4-5; 6:17.
13. How can the church wisely "use" culture without being "used" by it? Do you think it is possible to redeem the culture? Explain your answer, citing biblical passages as support.