

# CULTURE:

## where the PHYSICAL & SPIRITUAL CONVERGE

by Darrow L. Miller

**G**od made humankind to be *culture* makers, and it matters hugely what kind of culture we create. Whatever our vocation, whatever domain we are called to, as Christians our work is ultimately to create *kingdom culture*—culture that reflects the true nature and character of God.

Our charge as creators of culture has been called both the creation mandate and the cultural mandate. It is found in the creation narrative in Genesis 1:26–28:

Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.”

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.”

We read here that at the height of his creative activity, God said, “Let us make man in our image.” With these words man’s identity is established. Man is made *imago Dei*—in the image of God. God also said, “Let them rule.” With these words man’s purpose is established. Man was made to rule in God’s stead as vice regent. Or to use a different figure, man was made the steward of God’s household.

What God had made was perfect, but it was not finished yet. God is the primary creator; humankind, to use J.R.R. Tolkien’s words, is a “secondary creator.” God made primary creation. Humankind is to make a secondary creation—culture—that reveals and glorifies the Primary Creator and the primary creation. Human beings are to fill the earth with image bearers of God who will, in turn, develop the earth. Like an acorn, creation from the hand of God was perfect and complete in itself, but the potential had to be released by the man and the woman. The acorn is to be nurtured into a mighty oak.

### Culture: Worship Externalized

Why are the Genesis scriptures referred to as the cultural mandate? What does it mean to create culture? And what is culture, anyway?

# Culture: Where the Physical & Spiritual Converge

Theologian Henry Van Til states it very clearly and concisely: “Culture is religion externalized.”<sup>1</sup> At its heart, a culture is a manifestation of a people’s cult, or of their civic religion. It is a reflection of the god they worship. This understanding stands in contrast to the modern materialist’s assumption that culture is a reflection of a people’s race, or the sum total of their way of living, or their heritage. St. Augustine’s understanding of the nature of culture illuminates the importance of this distinction.

According to Augustine, culture is not a reflection of a people’s race, ethnicity, folklore, politics, language, or heritage. Rather it is an outworking of a people’s creed. In other words, culture is the temporal manifestation of a people’s faith. If a culture begins to change, it is not because of fads, fashions, or the passing of time, it is because of a shift in worldview—it is because of a change of faith. Thus, race, ethnicity, folklore, politics, language, or heritage is simply an expression of a deeper paradigm rooted in the covenantal and spiritual matrix of a community’s church and the integrity of its witness.

The reason that he spent so much of his life and ministry critiquing the pagan philosophies of the world and exposing the aberrant theologies of the church was that Augustine understood only too well that those things matter not only in the realm of eternity determining the spiritual destiny of masses of humanity but also in the realm of the here and now determining the temporal destiny of whole civilizations.

...Augustine recognized that a people’s dominant worldview inevitably shapes the world they have in view.<sup>2</sup>

Augustine understood that culture is a manifestation of man’s worship. It is a reflection of the nature and character of the one worshiped. Or to put it a little differently, culture is a manifestation of a people’s worldview. The Taliban in Afghanistan created a society that reflected their worship. Likewise, the USA’s popular culture is a reflection of the materialistic ideals of a secular belief system.

The modern concept of anthropology, as derived from materialistic thought, sees culture as neutral. In the materialistic paradigm, there is no God; there-

fore there is no objective truth; therefore everything is relative. From this set of assumptions there is no way that one person or culture can critique another. No one culture or aspect of a culture is seen as better than another. As such, all culture is valued for what it is. When we see culture as neutral, we are reluctant to critique it. Thus we can’t distinguish between the death camps of Nazi Germany, the hospitals of Mother Theresa’s Sisters of Charity, or the pop culture of contemporary America.

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Derived from worship, culture is anything but neutral. Culture stands at the convergence of the spiritual and physical realms. In fact, it can be said that the spiritual realm influences the physical realm at the level of culture. Just as ideas have consequences, so does our worship. The cult leads to the culture. This, in turn, determines the kinds of societies and nations we will build. This is clearly illustrated. If a people worships a deity who is capricious and can be bribed, like in Eastern animism, then a culture of corruption is established in which bribery is a part of everyday life. This manifests itself in business, economic, government, and judicial systems that are filled with corruption. This, in turn, leads to the material impoverishment of a nation in addition to spiritual impoverishment.

## Critiquing Culture

Clearly, culture is not neutral. Because we live in the universe created by the living God, and because, contrary to post-modernist thought, there is an objective reality, a people’s culture can be critiqued and evaluated. Not only can it be, it ought to be. If we are interested in the health of nations, we need to distinguish those things that lead to justice and those that breed corruption. We need to examine those things that give rise to freedom, compassion, and economic well-being in contrast to those that breed enslavement, cruelty, and poverty.

There are three major cultural grids: kingdom culture, counterfeit culture, and natural culture.<sup>3</sup> These are found, to differing degrees, in every nation.

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Every nation will have some kingdom and some counterfeit culture. This grid assumes that there is a God and that he has made a real and objective universe. There is truth and falsehood, good and evil, beauty and darkness.

## *Kingdom Culture*

Kingdom culture is built on the truth of reality. It is a reflection of the nature and character of the living God, the Creator of all that is. Kingdom culture is produced when people, consciously or unconsciously, obey God's laws. God's laws are a manifestation of his character. Just as God is true, just, and beautiful, so are his creation and the laws that govern it. When Jesus tells his disciples to make disciples of all nations, "teaching them to obey all that I have commanded" (Matt. 28:20), the phrase "all that I have commanded" is bounded by *truth* (which reflects God's metaphysical and physical laws), *justice* (which reflects God's moral laws), and *beauty* (which reflects God's aesthetic laws). Douglas Jones and Douglas Wilson describe this trilogy as "the three faces of culture."<sup>4</sup> These are the foundations of kingdom culture, and they lead to life, health, and development.

Kingdom culture is a manifestation of the kingdom of God. Jesus calls his disciples to have the kingdom of heaven impact the kingdom of earth. The Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:9–13) recognizes the interplay of the two kingdoms: "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." God's kingdom is any realm where "thy will be done," and where people "obey all that I have commanded." God's kingdom is to come to earth as it is in heaven. The substance of the kingdom is the same in the present and in the future, on the earth and in heaven. The difference is not the substance, but the degree of fulfillment.

Kingdom culture calls each people and nation "further up and further in" to the reign of Jesus. It calls forth the development of the earth, the cultivation of the soil and the soul, as an act of worship of the living God. The church, as an act of worship, is to create culture that manifests the nature and character of the living God to a watching world. This means that we are to bring truth (the biblical metaphysic), justice (the biblical ethic), and beauty (the biblical aesthetic) into *all* of life.

In every nation there will be elements of kingdom culture. Wherever it is found, it is to be nurtured and encouraged.

## *Counterfeit Culture*

Counterfeit culture is the product of believing Satan's lies about what is true, just, and beautiful. Satan is a liar and the father of lies. He lies to both individuals and nations. He lies to nations at the level of culture. Counterfeit culture is built on Satan's lies and demonic influences. Isaiah warns the nation of Israel against the twisting of reality:

Woe to those who call evil good  
and good evil,  
who put darkness for light  
and light for darkness,  
who put bitter for sweet  
and sweet for bitter. (Isa. 5:20)

It is the believing of these lies that leads to death, enslavement, and impoverishment of entire nations. Every nation has some level of counterfeit culture. If the nation is to grow with health, it must recognize the destructive elements, root them out, and replace them with kingdom principles.

## *Natural Culture*

The natural elements of a culture fall within the amoral realm. They are the unique colors, textures, sounds, and tastes of a people that accompany the created order. While they are morally neutral, they grant savor and life to the people and enjoyment to neighbors from other cultures. The natural elements are to be celebrated and enjoyed.

The more a culture manifests the Primary Creator and the primary creation, the more it may be considered good. The more reality is distorted, the darker the culture and the more impoverished and enslaved the people.

God created us to be culture makers. As Christians we are called to be intentional about creating *kingdom* culture. In making us in his image, in creating us to be creators, God gave each of us an awesome responsibility and opportunity. Indian scholar, writer, and development practitioner Vishal Mangalwadi expresses it with appropriate awe: "God speaks and creates the universe. Man speaks and creates culture that shapes the universe."<sup>5</sup>