Writing *All God’s Children and Blue Suede Shoes* changed my life. It was not a writing project I came up with on my own. In the late 1980s, editor Marvin Olasky approached me about contributing a book to a series that explored various aspects of Christian interaction with culture. Since I had a background in media and had studied film theory and criticism as an undergraduate, he thought the subject of popular culture would be of interest to me. Marvin was persuasive, so I signed a contract and began a regimen of reading and thinking (as well as conversing and arguing) that eventually produced this book, and it has only intensified in the many years since.

Reflection on the question of how the development of what we call “popular culture” has changed the lives of modern people—and, more importantly, changed the life of the Church—has introduced me to many other areas of study in history, sociology, philosophy, aesthetics, and theology. That question has motivated me to read hundreds of books, many of whose authors I have been privileged to interview for the *Mars Hill Audio Journal*. Asking how the Church might avoid the deleterious effects of the hegemony of popular culture has occupied many waking hours and even invaded my dreams. It is possible that medication and intensive counseling could have prevented me from such an intense preoccupation, a course of action my wife has probably envisioned more than she’ll admit. But I remain persuaded of a brazen claim made in 1989 (without as much knowledge as I have acquired since then), that “the challenge of living with popular culture may well be as serious for modern Christians as persecution and plagues were for the saints of earlier centuries.”

I also insisted then that “Christian concern about popular culture should be as much about the sensibilities it encourages as about its content.” The convictions behind this claim have become harder to explain with the passage of time, because the sensibilities that I believe to be problematic have now become so dominant as to be imperceptible. “Sensibilities” is for some an elusive concept. Its meaning might be triangulated by introducing
other (perhaps equally elusive) phrases: the orientation of the affections, the posture of the soul, the desires of the heart, the characteristic hungers and expectations. The sensibilities I had in mind overlapped with the diagnosis implicit in the title to Neil Postman’s *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. People whose lives are dominated by the sensibilities of popular culture are more insistent that all experiences be fun, they are less interested in sustaining traditions, and they are unfazed by the charge that they aren’t behaving like mature adults.

In a 2005 article in *Youthworker Journal*, “Colonising the Adult Church: Our Part in the Spread of Consumerism and Commercialization,” youth minister Peter Ward argued that the sensibilities once limited to youth culture were now the dominant sensibilities everywhere, and churches were not unaffected by the changes:

> When we see retired guys buying Harley Davidsons and dressing up in leathers, forty-somethings packing the concert halls to witness the reunion of the Sex Pistols, and mums swapping clothes and even boyfriends with their daughters, we shouldn’t be surprised at the developments in the church. There was a time when young people wanted to grow up. Now adults don’t just want to be young again; they actually see themselves and present themselves as young.¹

Not all popular culture is produced for young people, but the spirit of popular culture continues to be the spirit of youth culture: suspicious of authority and of the past, allergic to formality, impatient with the limitations of propriety, and fearful of being perceived as uncool. To be young today—or stubbornly to think of oneself as young—is to see life as all possibility and no necessity.

Popular culture in its very structure advances this orientation toward life as pure possibility. Popular culture presents us with a set of attractive commodities, all freely chosen, rather than—as is the case with folk cultures or high culture—a cultural inheritance with boundaries, definition, and obligations. If I were to write this book today, one theme I would explore at much greater length is how popular culture is both an expression of and a conduit for the modern view of freedom, of the self, and of transcendent meaning. Living in the matrix of popular culture, we are encouraged to see ourselves as sovereign consumers who construct the meaning of our lives from our free choices. By contrast, on a premodern (and Christian) view, the wisdom and meaning embedded in a cultural legacy—faithfully transmitted from one generation to the next—was an aid whereby we could be trained to discipline our desires and so be free from captivity to mere appetites. Cultures historically set boundaries; popular culture (as the preeminent form of modern culture) encourages liberation. Composed of webs of authoritative institutions, prescribed practices, and approved artifacts, traditional cultures conveyed an understanding of the world and cultivated the dispositions necessary to receive and sustain that understanding. Literary critic Marion Montgomery once observed that “education is the preparing of the mind for the presence of our common inheritance, the accumulated and accumulating knowledge of the truth of things.”² Such preparation was not simply the task of formal schooling, but of all cultural institutions in concert.

**THE TRUTH OF THINGS**

The arrival of popular culture as we know it signals the tipping point of modern skepticism about the truth of things. Modern cultures (to the extent that they are modern) are characterized by their denial of the existence of the truth of things (more on this below). Whether we use the term youth culture, popular culture, or consumer culture, what they all have in common is the absence of elders whose institutional authority obligates them to convey that accumulated and accumulating inheritance. If I were rewriting this book today—having read many other books about culture—I would also give greater emphasis to the meaning of the modern setting in which popular culture arises. Within popular culture, many individual artifacts and practices do affirm a truth about things. But because we are free consumers of cultural commodities—because the system of popular culture neither establishes canons nor conveys taboos—we can choose whatever truth we want. Living within the system of popular culture, we find it more plausible that truth about the nature of things is private, not public, and ultimately purely subjective.

Sociologist Daniel Bell observed that what defines the modern is “the proposition that there are no ends or purposes given in nature; that the individual, and his or her self-realization, is the new standard of judgement; and that one can remake one’s self and remake society in an effort to


achieve those goals." Similarly theologian Lesslie Newbigin argued that the central and most formative fact of modern culture is "the elimination of teleology." As Newbigin, Bell, and many others have observed, this shift is a profound deviation from classical and Christian ways of understanding reality, in which cultures cultivated persons to abide by the grain of the universe. C. S. Lewis describes the premodern view as one in which "the cardinal problem had been how to conform the soul to reality, and the solution had been knowledge, self-discipline, and virtue." According to the modern view—unwittingly set in motion by Bacon, Descartes, and others—the problem is how to subdue reality to the wishes of men. And there is no reality—no truth of things—to order our wishes.

One might be very purposeful about so subduing reality, but one’s purpose in doing so would be entirely subjective, and hence, in a sense, purposeless. Newbigin observes that there is a "strange fissure" running through the consciousness of modern man, who is encouraged to understand the workings of the world apart from concepts of purpose. "The ideal that he seeks would eliminate all ideals. With dedicated zeal he purposes to explain the world as something that is without purpose." As long as modern culture insists that all "values" are subjective and not tied to objective "facts"—that all attributions of purpose are private and idiosyncratic—"this fissure cannot be healed. If purpose is not a feature of the world of 'facts,' and if human beings entertain purposes, that is their personal choice and they will have to create these purposes for themselves. These purposes cannot claim the authority of facts; they are personal opinions, and those who hold them can do so, provided they do not interfere with the freedom of others to hold different opinions. But they can claim no universal authority; they belong to the private world."

If any autonomously chosen purpose is thus as good as any other, widespread skepticism about or indifference toward the truth of things is not surprising. Sociologist Craig Gay has observed that in the modern account, "the order of Nature was thus no longer held to present an intrinsically meaningful order to which every reason must submit itself in faith if it is to be fulfilled. Rather, the individual rational self was held to possess the ability to ascribe its own internal order to reality, thereby rendering it meaningful." One is thus free to establish purposes for oneself—as long as they don’t interfere in certain ways with the purposes of others. As Bell puts it, "The only question is what constitutes fulfillment of the self: endless pleasure, as in the round of Don Juan; the pyramidal accumulation of material goods; the private decision about moral conduct (as, for example, choice on abortion) as against 'public' morality or 'natural' law."

We have been living in a purpose-denying culture for some time; Nietzsche realized the consequences of such a cultural regime over a century ago, but many good people have been slow to recognize the depths of our dilemma and the kind of social reformation and reconstruction that would be necessary to prevent a more general and obvious nihilism from taking over. I am convinced that the effect of the system of popular culture is to reinforce this denial of purpose. And given the triumph of popular culture within all our major institutions—including many churches—we shouldn’t be surprised that an increasing number of young people seem aimless. If there’s ultimately nothing to aim at, why bother?

NORMALLY NIHILISTIC.

Sociologist Christian Smith’s research on the spiritual lives of young people demonstrates that this essentially nihilistic assumption is deeply embedded in their consciousness. In his research about the cultural lives of “emerging adults,” he discovered an inability to affirm even the idea of the truth of things:

The majority of emerging adults . . . have great difficulty grasping the idea that a reality that is objective to their own awareness or construction of it may exist that could have a significant bearing on their lives . . . They are de facto doubtful that an identifiable, objective, shared reality might exist across and around people that can serve as a reliable reference point for rational deliberation and argument. So, for example, when we interviewers tried to get respondents to talk about whether what they take to be substantive moral beliefs reflect some objective or universal reality or standard are simply relative human inventions, many—if not most—could not understand what we interviewers were trying to get at. They had difficulty seeing the possible distinction between, in this case, objective moral truth and relative human invention. This is not because
they are dumb. It seems to be because they cannot, for whatever reason, believe in—or sometimes even conceive of—a given, objective truth, fact, reality, or nature of the world that is independent of their subjective self-experience and that in relation to which they and others might learn or be persuaded to change. Although none would put it in exactly this way, what emerging adults take to be reality ultimately seems to consist of a multitude of subjective but ultimately autonomous experiences. People are thus trying to communicate with each other in order to simply be able to get along and enjoy life as they see fit. Beyond that, anything truly objectively shared or common or real seems impossible to access.\(^{10}\)

Under the heading "It's Up to the Individual," Smith summarizes many of research findings:

According to emerging adults, the absolute authority for every person's beliefs or actions is his or her own sovereign self. Anybody can literally think or do whatever he or she wants. Of course, what a person chooses to think or do may have bad consequences for that person. But everything is ultimately up to each individual to decide for himself or herself. The most one should ever do toward influencing another person is to ask him or her to consider what one thinks. Nobody is bound to any course of action by virtue of belonging to a group or because of a common good. Individuals are autonomous agents who have to deal with each other, yes, but do so entirely as self-directing choosers. The words duty, responsibility, and obligation feel somehow vaguely coercive or puritanical.\(^{11}\)

It's possible that the vast majority of twenty-somethings have come to these conclusions by reading atheistic philosophers, but my hunch is that they have absorbed their happy nihilism from living in a culture in which the modern denial of objective meaning has become institutionalized. According to the playbook of popular culture, all value judgments are expressions of preference. Who has ever told these young people, for example, that this piece of music is objectively better than that piece of music? Who has ever dared to say that this activity is more conducive to building character than that activity? Who has ever conveyed to them any notions of propriety or fittingness, suggesting, for example, that their manner of
dress or deportment or speech was inappropriate to a particular occasion? Who, in other words, has exercised cultural authority? Within the dictates of popular culture, there is no authority other than popularity. In such a setting, belief in an objective moral order in the nature of things seems entirely implausible.

A culture is an ecosystem of institutions, practices, artifacts, and beliefs, all interacting and mutually reinforcing. Cultures are rarely entirely homogenous or consistent, but generalizations about specific cultures are nonetheless possible. Despite their complexity, cultures can have an overriding ethos. The incredulity toward ultimate purpose or meaning that characterizes modern culture isn't simply a function of explicit beliefs contained as messages in discrete cultural artifacts. It is more deeply sustained by the practices and institutions in which we live and breathe and comprehend our being. What makes our culture modern is that despite the explicit beliefs by many citizens, our public institutions—education, government, the arts, entertainment, journalism, science and technology, commerce—all function without any necessary direction from any teleological vision. They operate without working toward any purpose beyond material benefit and the maximizing of choices for individuals. Discussion about the common good is strained at best because we have no shared vision of what the good is and believe that public life requires the bracketing of definitions of the good.

While more substantive, teleological beliefs may be held by many people and presented in some cultural artifacts, the dynamics of the system in which we live contradicts those beliefs. This dissonant situation makes such beliefs harder to acquire and sustain. As I argue in *All God's Children and Blue Suede Shoes*, the form of cultural expression shapes the perception of its content, and in many cases (especially in music and other abstract arts) the form is the work's content. When the form of communication (and the form of the system within which it is experienced) contradicts the content, the form often wins. This is in part because we are involved in formal structures at a deep, precognitive, often visceral level—a level closer to our hearts than our heads. If our affections and desires are nudged in a direction that contradicts the direction suggested by content, the content is likely to lose.

Media ecologist Marshall McLuhan provocatively insisted that "our conventional response to all media, namely that it is how they are used that counts, is the numb stance of the technological idiot. For the 'content' of


\(^{11}\) Ibid.
a medium is like the juicy piece of meat carried by the burglar to distract the watchdog of the mind.” And while our minds are preoccupied with what may be very uplifting or noble content, the form may be imparting a very different way of viewing the world. If content that extolls “truth” or “natural law” is presented within a cultural ecosystem that sustains the sanctity of individual preference and that promotes cynicism toward anything not perceived to be immediately gratifying, that content is likely to be dismissed.

THE HEART’S REASONS

The role of culture in educating and nurturing its young was understood for millennia to be less a matter of conveying content than of shaping the affections. Education—formal and informal—was not simply the imparting of knowledge or the skills to acquire knowledge, but the training of desires and emotions. As Lewis remarks in The Abolition of Man, “Until quite modern times all teachers and even all men believed the universe to be such that certain emotional reactions on our part could either be congruous or incongruous to it—believed, in fact, that objects did not merely receive, but could merit, our approval or disapproval, our reverence, or our contempt.” And so, children had to be “trained to feel pleasure, liking, disgust, and hatred at those things which really are pleasant, likable, disgusting, and hateful.”

Today—in large measure thanks to the dominance of popular culture—the training of the affections is likely to be regarded as an elitist violation of individual autonomy. Our problem is not simply the presence of artifacts that encourage ignoble desires. It is the abandonment by our dominant institutions of the task of deliberately directing desires toward what really is true, good, and beautiful. Popular culture—in its present nature and in its unprecedented social centrality—has evolved to reflect the modern assumption that each individual should be free and encouraged to define reality (and hence to define purpose) for him- or herself. The rise of the entertainment industry as a central cultural power simply reflects its inherent embodiment of the modern project of “doing your own thing.”

In a 1958 essay called “The Emergence of Fun Morality,” social scientist Martha Wolfenstein called attention to signs of a new morality displacing traditional concerns with doing the right thing. The advent of fun morality—and the cultural institutions and artifacts that enabled it—soon meant that not having fun was an occasion for anxiety. As Dr. Wolfenstein observed: “Whereas gratification of forbidden impulses traditionally aroused guilt, failure to have fun now lowers one’s self-esteem.” As this moral inversion has gathered momentum, cultural institutions previously unconcerned with promoting fun gradually succumbed to the assumption that unless they could be entertaining, they would be left in the dust. By the time of the last two or three decades of the twentieth century, numerous cultural institutions—once committed to being sources of moral meaning, definition, and authority—had surrendered. Political candidates felt compelled to appear on Saturday Night Live and on chicanery talk shows. University professors emulated stand-up comics. Many clergy supervised the overhaul of worship services to make them more like variety shows. Art museums (and many artists) outdid one another in seeking to make art fun. Journalism—first on TV, then in print—traded depth and moral seriousness for flashy superficiality. The idea of cultural authority and the sorts of limits and disciplines it would promote capitulated to the claim that all of life is market-driven, a claim that makes sense in a purpose-free cosmos.

It’s not that good things couldn’t still happen within these institutions. But they increasingly saw themselves not as exercising authority but as begging for attention. They could no longer articulate “thou shalt” and “thou shalt nots”; they could no longer sustain taboos or offer exhortation about duty and obligation. In short, these institutions effectively abandoned the task of articulating the contours of a purposeful and morally ordered universe within which individuals might seek to conform their souls. Modernity’s sovereign individuals were best understood as consumers, not as disciples, apprentices, or heirs. The advent of fun morality was not simply a displacement of seriousness. It represented the institutional loss of confidence that there was anything worth being serious about. It was (in Allan Bloom’s memorable formulation) the confirmation of nihilism without the abyss.

CHURCH AS CULTURE

Since All God’s Children and Blue Suede Shoes was published, I have watched countless efforts by well-meaning Christians to use the

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2Lewis, The Abolition of Man, 9.
3Ibid., 10.
mechanisms of popular culture to convey the message of the gospel and its consequences. All of these efforts assume (as did Pete Ward in the article I cited at the beginning of this introduction) that the Church has no choice but to adapt to the spirit of the age and its tools. I reject that assumption. In the years since I wrote this book, I have come to appreciate the theological arguments (and the various historical studies) which insist that the Church should properly understand itself as a people: not as a club or a clinic or a show or a service provider, but something more like a nation, a polis. The Church is not simply in the business of getting individuals saved. The Church’s task is to nurture and shape its members into disciples, who observe everything their Lord—the Lord of heaven and earth—has commanded. Of course, the Church must be eagerly active to bring in new members. But it must deliberately be a body the membership in which makes a difference. It must offer a way of life—a that is distinct from the world’s ways. And it must seek to baptize its new members into Christ and into his body, which means that they must be exhorted to abandon their old memberships and allegiances.

In a conversation I had several years ago with D. H. Williams—now a professor at Baylor University who teaches the work of the early Church fathers—we talked about how seriously the early Church’s supervision of new converts took this process of en culturing its members. “In the process of teaching or catechizing new Christians,” Williams said to me, “it was taken with great seriousness that the commitment that they were making was a corporate one, and an exclusive one. And that it entailed a body of meaning that in many ways was inviting them to become members of a counterculture, from the one in which they had converted from. And even the catechetical process itself begins to raise important questions about the church as culture. That you are de facto encouraging the new Christian to learn a new vocabulary, a new sense of what is the highest, the good, and the beautiful; that there really are true things and false things; that there really are certain moral lines to be drawn in the sand, and that you may struggle with these, and part of the struggle is very good.”

Church historian Robert Louis Wilken made a very similar case in an interview given (not, sadly, to me) in 1998 in which he reflected on the early Church’s posture toward its cultural surroundings. Wilken pointed out that the principal way in which the early Church leaders sustained cultural influence was by discipling its members, by conveying to them that the call of the gospel was a call to embrace a new way of life. The Church was less interested in transforming the disorders of the Roman Empire than in building “its own sense of community, and it let these communities be the leaven that would gradually transform culture.” The Church was not a body that “spoke to its culture; it was itself a culture and created a new Christian culture.”

To speak of the Church as a culture is to use the word “culture” in a thicker way than it is often used today. When Robert Louis Wilken writes of a Christian culture, he is referring to (in his words) the “pattern of inherited meanings and sensibilities encoded in rituals, law, language, practices, and stories that can order, inspire, and guide the behavior, thoughts, and affections of a Christian people.” By referring to “a Christian people,” Wilken is reminding individualistic Americans that the gospel is about the calling of a people, not the making of discrete and separate converts. This view permeates the New Testament; using language that echoes texts in the Torah, St. Peter addresses Christian exiles in Asia Minor (and future generations of Christian believers) this way: “You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.” Theologian Peter Leithart has picked up on this theme in arguing that “in the New Testament, we do not find an essentially private gospel being applied to the public sphere, as if the public implications of the gospel were a second story built on the private ground floor. The gospel is the announcement of the Father’s formation, through His Son and the Spirit, of a new city—the city of God.”

If this is the case, Leithart argues, then “the Church is not a club for religious people. The Church is a way of living together before God, a new way of being human together.” This was surely the perspective of the early Church, though one wonders how common it is today. The assemblies of believers in the first century and long after were not perceived to be resource centers for the promotion of merely private spirituality; they were not religious branches of the larger Greco-Roman project. Rather,

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131 Peter 2:9-10.
14Peter J. Leithart, Against Christianity (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2003), 16.
The early Church lived with the formative conviction (in Leithart's phrase) "that God has established the eschatological order of human life in the midst of history, not perfectly but truly." Therefore, the Church's life—the shared relationships and practices of the redeemed community—was truly a matter with public consequences. Leithart argues that these public consequences reflect the eschatological character of the Church. "The Church anticipates the form of the human race as it will be when it comes to maturity; she is the 'already' of the new humanity that will be perfected in the 'not yet' of the last day." So conversion necessarily led to discipleship that had extensive consequences. "Conversion thus means turning from one way of life, one culture, to another. Conversion is the beginning of a 'resocialization,' ... and 'inculturation' into the way of life practiced by the eschatological community."21

MERELY A PERSONAL SAVIOR?

Modern Christianity has largely lost sight of this vision. We assume that our way of life will be substantially shaped not by the gospel, but by the convictions and practices dictated by government, the market, science, technology, and popular culture. Our churches are quite likely to be low-commitment clubs for religious people rather than definitive communities of disciples striving to live all of life under God's kingship. For many modern Christians, churches are dispensers of eternal security and uplift—fire insurance and mood brighteners—not nurturers of a whole way of life, not the source of the best ways to act and think in all spheres of experience. The message of the gospel is commonly assumed to be personal and private, not communal and public. So many well-meaning Christians believe that the best way for the Church to influence American culture is by imitating as much as possible whatever way of life happens to be fashionable and popular, in the hopes that people will like us and listen to us. What we have for our neighbors is a message about an ethereal eternal life and about coping with frustrations here and now, and so we just need to communicate a message about a short list of values capable of being perceived as relevant to conventional lifestyles. This truncated vision of the Church's mission is wonderfully American but not very biblical.

Contemporary culture—now largely ordered by the logic of popular culture—has effectively abandoned what it means to be a culture. Insofar as it promotes liberation instead of restraint and self-control, it is (in the words of Philip Rieff) an "anticulture."22 Christopher Clausen has argued that we live in a time of "postculturalism."23 My own formulation is that popular culture paradoxically encourages autoculturalism—each of us forming a culture of one in which my choices are guided by no external forces. Popular culture is thus a contradiction in terms. Whatever it is, it is not a culture in any historically recognized sense.

What cultures have been—and must be—are traditions: ways of life that are conveyed from one generation to the next. For some time I have been musing on the idea that the fifth commandment is an exhortation for the people of God to recognize that, in order to sustain a sense of being a people, they must sustain traditions. Moral philosopher Oliver O'Donovan seems to agree. In a remarkable passage of his book on community, Common Objects of Love, O'Donovan correlates the honoring of parents with the sustaining of communal traditions.

The paradigm command of tradition is, "Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land which the Lord your God gives you." It appears to our eyes to be concerned with the duties of children, but this is a mistake. The duties of children are purely responsive to the duty of parents to be to their children what their parents were to them. This is a command addressed to adults, whose existence in the world is not self-posed but the fruit of an act of cultural transmission, which they have a duty to sustain. The act of transmission puts us all in the place of receiver and communicator at once. The household is envisaged as the primary unit of cultural transmission, the "father and the mother" as representing every existing social practice which it is important to carry on. Only so can community sustain itself within its environment, "the land which the Lord your God gives you." No social survival in any land can be imagined without a stable cultural environment across generations. By tradition society identifies itself from one historical moment to the next, and so continues to act as itself.24

No political movement, no ideology, no social activists have done more to sever this essential cultural continuity than have the mechanisms of popular culture. As a result, disobedience to the fifth commandment has

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21Ibid.
23See Christopher Clausen, "Welcome to Post-culturalism," The American Scholar (Summer 1996) and Faded Mosaic: The Emergence of Post-Cultural America (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2000).
become at least as institutionalized by the practices and attitudes encouraged by popular culture as has the breaking of the later prohibitions against adultery (realized in lust) and covetousness.

To resist the disorientations of popular culture, church leaders and their followers need to recover a rich theology and practice of the Church as a people with a distinctive culture. Such a recovery is rarely promoted by the people most preoccupied with attending to cultural matters; they seem largely uninterested in criticizing the cultural status quo, especially what I’ve called the hegemony of popular culture.

CONSIDER THE TURTLE
A large percentage of Christians—especially younger Christians—are taking more seriously the challenge of “cultural engagement.” Churches, parachurch groups, Christian media and publishing: all show evidence of addressing the world outside the Church more deliberately and more energetically, but not always more wisely. The word “engagement” is one of those wonderfully multivalent English words. Armies can be engaged, attempting to kill each other. Gears can be engaged, so that one drives another. Lovers can be engaged, committed to becoming one flesh. I often wonder which meaning of the word Christians have in mind when they talk about cultural engagement.

One of the slogans I’ve repeated in promoting the Mars Hill Audio Journal is that cultural engagement without cultural wisdom leads to cultural captivity. I fear that many well-meaning believers—eager to share the gospel with their neighbors and contemporaries—run the risk of becoming as wise as doves and as harmless as serpents. Shaped more than they realize by the disorders of their culture—especially by the media-inflected impatience with careful and systematic thought, and by a suspicion of formality and tradition—they admirably want to be more like Jesus, but they’re not really sure they want to be more like Paul, Augustine, Aquinas, Calvin, or Jonathan Edwards. What they are missing, I believe, is an awareness that the Church can only engage the culture by being a culture.

In 2009, the young art historian Matthew Milliner wrote a perceptive piece online about the hipper young Christians who use the vocabulary of being “missional” and “emerging.” He noted that their suspicion of forms and institutions—which, I might add, they have absorbed more from popular culture than from Scripture—causes them to reject the idea of the Church being culturally distinctive. “For them,” he writes, “culture is as dispensable to Christianity as a hermit crab’s shell is to the crab. The true essence of the gospel might don cultural attire when necessary, but only to just as quickly cast it off, seeking new garb to attract a fresh set of converts.” We should travel light, change often, and stay in tune with the Zeitgeist.

But Milliner noted another paradigm of Church and culture:

For others, culture is less easily distinguished from Christianity. It is almost as indispensable to Christianity as a turtle’s shell is to the turtle. A turtle is permanently fused to its habitation by its backbone and ribs; the shell is inextricable from the creature itself. Removing it would rip the animal apart. In its single shell lie a turtle’s protection, distinction, and beauty. This unique relationship to its hardened exterior is what places turtles among the earth’s oldest reptiles—contemporaries of both dinosaurs and us.  

Milliner cited Robert Louis Wilken as a proponent of the turtle paradigm, who argues that forms with longevity are needed to pass the faith on to subsequent generations in its fullness. He also cited T. S. Eliot, who in his essays on Christianity and culture warns that to neglect the transmission of Christian culture is to destroy “our ancient edifices to make ready the ground upon which the barbarian nomads of the future will encamp in their mechanized caravans.”

In light of Eliot’s metaphor, I must confess that, visiting many churches and parachurch gatherings, I am reminded of Alasdair MacIntyre’s observation at the end of After Virtue, when he noted that “the barbarians are not waiting beyond the frontiers; they have already been governing us for quite some time.”  

I fear that a good number of clergy and parachurch leaders (especially among those with large followings) have achieved their positions because of their ability to manipulate and manage the mechanisms of popular culture. But they lack the skills or temperaments necessary to exercise wise cultural authority, to train people to observe the fifth commandment and its cultural consequences. It’s not all their fault: that’s what many American churchgoers and the parachurch constituents expect and demand. I hope I live long enough to see this trend reversed.

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24Alasdair C. MacIntyre, After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 263.
I'm grateful to Crossway for having kept this book in print for such a long time. They have invited me to revise it, but an adequate revision would entail writing a new book. Having reread it, I think this remains a useful introduction to the subject. I'm glad to know that for many readers, it is the first book-length treatment of the topic they have read. I can only hope that for many it is not the last.

THE PLAGUE OF TERMINAL TRENDINESS

Let's begin by establishing your Pop Culture Quotient (PCQ). First, how many entertainment appliances are in your house? Count all the radios, televisions, VCRs, video cameras, cable-TV descrambler boxes, television antenna controllers, CD players, cassette decks, boom boxes, turntables, graphic equalizers, receivers, and computer game units. (Unless you find some very strange things amusing, don't include microwave ovens or blenders.) If you're of a certain age, you may have a lava-lamp in the attic. Count that too. If it's still in your living room, count it twice.

Now count up the number of magazines you subscribe to or read regularly, excluding academic journals founded before 1958 and denominational publications. Count People, Us, Self, and all supermarket tabloids twice. Count TV Guide three times if you actually read it. Count Sports Illustrated four times if you ordered it just to get the swimsuit issue. (Also talk to your pastor.) If you get Sports Illustrated and throw away the swimsuit issue without reading it, subtract three from your total. Count Spy twice if you laugh at it, three times if you read it regularly and don't laugh at all. Subtract three if you live within 300 miles of New York City and you've never heard of Spy.
WHAT IS CULTURE, THAT THOU ART MINDFUL OF IT?

FIDDLING ON THE BRINK OF HELL

In a sermon given in 1939 at Oxford, C. S. Lewis raised the question: What are all of us doing here studying philosophy or medieval literature, while Europe is at war? “Why should we — indeed how can we — continue to take an interest in these placid occupations when the lives and liberties of our friends and the liberties of Europe are in the balance? Is it not like fiddling while Rome burns?”

Lewis went on to argue that the Christian faces precisely that question even during peacetime. “To a Christian,” he observed, “the true tragedy of Nero must be not that he fiddled while the city was on fire but that he fiddled on the brink of hell.”

Lewis then posed the question of the worth of Christians taking an interest in culture, particularly the academic study of culture. “Every Christian who comes to a university must at all times face a question compared with which the questions raised by war are relatively unimportant. He must ask himself how it is right, or even psychologically possible, for creatures who are every moment advancing either to heaven or hell, to spend any fraction of the little time allowed them in this world on such comparative trivialities as literature or art, mathematics or biology.”
Lewis's reply was that the ideal of suspending all cultural activity for the sake of evangelism or the pursuit of holiness was impossible. "If you attempted," he argued, "to suspend your whole intellectual and aesthetic activity, you would only succeed in substituting a worse cultural life for a better." This is precisely what many religious people do, which is one of the reasons we have such bad music and ugly architecture in Christian settings. Lewis went on:

You are not, in fact, going to read nothing, either in the Church or on the [front] line: if you don't read good books you will read bad ones. If you don't go on thinking rationally, you will think irrationally. If you reject aesthetic satisfactions you will fall into sensual satisfactions.4

We cannot afford to be indifferent about culture any more than we can afford to be indifferent about the toxicity of the water we drink or the air we breathe. Even if we believe that the church is a kind of eschatological parenthesis in the history of redemption, we are still faced with real choices about how we spend our time and resources so as best to love God with all our being and love our neighbor.

The experience of popular culture is a bit different from that of high culture. Studying the works of J. S. Bach or John Donne systematically will likely afford us a better appreciation of them. But few people argue that a careful, rigorous, painstaking analysis of the compositions of Oingo Boingo will result in an enhanced perception of their records.

Most study of popular culture is concerned with sociological or political rather than aesthetic questions. Read any issue of the Journal of Popular Culture, and you are likely to see articles on topics such as animal rights and the circus geek, or a title such as "Class and Gender in Traveling Salesman Jokes: A Dialectical Deconstruction." If Lewis's colleagues were raising these sorts of questions, he probably would have enjoined them to get out to the front.

One reason aesthetic questions rarely arise in the study of popular culture is that cultural relativism is so well-entrenched; it is generally assumed that questions of taste merely reflect political interests rather than any transcendent order of beauty or propriety. A Christian assessment of popular culture must take social and aesthetic perspectives in view. Culture is not (as many scholars today believe) simply the battleground for a perpetual war of classes, races, and genders. Such battles do occur, but they have much less to do with determining the quality of life in a culture than ideological academics imagine.

Culture has very much to do with the human spirit. What we find beautiful or entertaining or moving is rooted in our spiritual life. Most modern social critics are concerned about culture in general and popular culture in particular because of the political and economic consequences of certain cultural arrangements. They are obsessed with questions of power. But there is a realm of human experience that is prior to power. It is the imagination, and it has profound significance in shaping human history and in assisting (or opposing) moral and spiritual ends. The aesthetic aspects of culture are much closer to the spiritual core of experience than are sociological considerations. T. S. Eliot has noted that aesthetic sensibility and spiritual perception are very closely related. But of course, there are social forces that encourage or discourage certain aesthetic choices, and our study will not ignore them.

CULTURE AND RELIGION

Any adequate definition of culture seems so encompassing as to include everything in human experience. One nineteenth-century anthropologist offered this definition: "Culture is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society." One would like to have asked this scholar exactly what culture excludes.

Defining culture, as it turns out, is not at all an easy task. We can easily come up with a dictionary definition, and it would look something like the one in the previous paragraph. But such a definition, while helpful, is a bit like the classic definition of man as a featherless biped. It tells us how to recognize the thing defined, but it doesn't tell us much about how it behaves.
Jolly Hermann Göring, World War I flying ace and head of Hitler’s Luftwaffe, is alleged to have offered a more practical perspective on culture. “When I hear anyone talk of culture,” he warned, “I reach for my revolver.”

In 1948, T. S. Eliot wrote an essay over a hundred pages long called “Notes Towards the Definition of Culture.” Eliot took a more normative than descriptive approach to defining culture. He wrote that culture may be described “simply as that which makes life worth living. And it is what justifies other peoples and other generations in saying, when they contemplate the remains and the influence of an extinct civilisation, that it was worth while for that civilisation to have existed.”

In the course of making his “Notes,” Eliot saw that there are great affinities between culture and religion. No culture, argued Eliot, “can appear or develop except in relation to a religion.” Eliot believed that the same religion may inform a variety of cultures, but he questioned whether any culture could come into being without some sort of religious basis. Religion and culture, Eliot argued, are in a sense two aspects of the same thing. This means that culture cannot be preserved or developed without religion, an argument that many Christians have been presenting to twentieth-century secularists. But Eliot insisted that it also means that religion cannot be preserved or maintained without the preservation and maintenance of culture.

We must be careful to be modest in appropriating Eliot’s insights, because in the next paragraph of his essay Eliot said that this way of looking at religion and culture “is so difficult that I am not sure I grasp it myself except in flashes, or that I comprehend all its implications.” If he didn’t quite understand what he was saying, we don’t want to be too quick to assume that we do. But a more serious problem with accepting Eliot’s prescriptions too easily is that he was assuming a society in which there is an established church. In his earlier essay, “The Idea of a Christian Society” (1940), he clearly said that “such a society can only be realised when the great majority of the sheep belong to the same fold.” He meant the same institutional church. Eliot believed that the separation of church and state on the American model, while it avoided many problems, created problems of its own, among them the virtual impossibility of a Christian society or a Christian culture as he understood it.

CULTURE AND RELATIVISM

But for our present purposes, Eliot at least serves to focus attention on the relationship between culture and some transcendent norms. In the study of culture, argued Eliot, “the most important question that we can ask, is whether there is any permanent standard, by which we can compare one civilisation with another.” If there are transcendent norms for assessing culture, a number of things happen. First of all, we are forced to fight cultural relativism, that nasty habit all too common in the twentieth century to assume that all values that have some tie with one’s culture are simply created by that culture, that all cultures create different values, and that it is simply egocentric and chauvinistic to prefer one set of values to another. Allan Bloom’s The Closing of the American Mind should have marked the death of cultural relativism. As Bloom argued, “the fact that there have been different opinions about good and bad in different times and places in no way proves that none is superior to others. . . . On the face of it, the difference of opinion would seem to raise the question as to which is true or right rather than to banish it. The natural reaction is to try to resolve the difference, to examine the claims and reasons for each opinion.”

Cultural relativism is one of the dominant assumptions of modern American culture. In addition to being a great obstacle to clear thinking about culture, it is one of the great enemies of Christianity, since all good cultural relativists would have to say that Christianity as we understand it is just a product of Western culture. The idea that the Bible makes universal truth-claims is absurd, since there’s no such thing.

Cultural relativism not only makes it impossible to assert that, for example, Thomas Jefferson is a more significant thinker than a headhunter from Borneo; it also makes it impossible to claim that Thomas Jefferson is a more significant thinker than Bruce Springsteen. Cultural relativism cuts in several planes. It denies the possibility that one society’s culture might be superior
to another's, and it denies the possibility that one form of cultural expression might be superior to another form within the same culture.

Eliot says that if, on the other hand, there are permanent standards by which we can measure a culture, or some aspect of it, “we can distinguish between higher and lower cultures; we can distinguish between advance and retrogression.”12 Not only can we say that some cultures are in certain ways superior to others, and that some cultural phenomena are superior to others within the same culture, we can also look at whether a culture is in a period of cultural progress or cultural decline.

As Christians, we insist that there are permanent standards for culture. Culture is the human effort to give structure to life. But human nature does not exist as a law unto itself. Human nature is, as part of God's creation, a permanent standard. Men and women cannot act against their own nature without violating the standards God has established in their very being. Moreover, the rest of creation, in which culture is established and with which culture must always contend, has a divinely established order. Cultural institutions, artifacts, and expressions that deny, suppress, or distort that order ought to be recognized as inferior to those that acknowledge, honor, and enjoy it.

**CULTURE IN CONTEXT**

_Culture_ is an abstraction. We cannot isolate for observation three pounds or fourteen centimeters of culture. These abstract questions of definition are extremely important, just as some amount of abstract thinking about who God is and what man is are necessary if we want to be obedient to God. But responsible evaluation of culture must always deal with concrete human experience of what has been labeled “culture.” We don’t, after all, encounter culture. We hear a particular song or see a specific film or read a novel that we have chosen from among all the others available.

Not only does cultural analysis require that we look at real cultural experiences, it requires that we look at them in their natural habitat, and that we understand something of their history.

In assessing rock ‘n’ roll, for example, it’s not enough to read the lyrics and find out on what beat of each measure the accent falls. We also need to consider what relationship rock has with other aspects of pop culture, what social role it plays for its fans, and how it compares with other musical options available to listeners. We need to look at the _culture_ of rock, not just the words and the music.

Such consideration of the context of a particular cultural expression is important not for the sake of some sort of academic purity, but for the sake of Christian wisdom. Many of the decisions we make about our involvement in popular culture are not really questions about good and evil. When I decide not to read a certain book, I am not necessarily saying that to read it would be a sin. It is much more likely that I believe it to be imprudent to take the time to read that book at this time in my life. To paraphrase Paul’s argument in 1 Corinthians 10 (which is, as we shall see, a very significant passage for our thinking about culture), something may be permissible, but it may not be very beneficial or constructive.

Each of us arises every morning with, in the providence of God, a number of duties, dilemmas, opportunities, and confusions that stem from living in a particular culture at a particular time. Our decisions about what sort of involvement with popular culture is prudent does not occur in isolation. Just as a critic cannot understand a song or a novel or a movie outside of its cultural context, we cannot anticipate or evaluate the effect popular culture has on our lives without looking at that context. Do I want to read that book because everyone else is reading it, or because of some intrinsic merit it has? Am I turning on the television because there is something I want to watch, or because I am addicted to distracting titillation?

**CULTURE AND SOCIAL ENGINEERING**

No particular form of popular culture is inevitable. It is not ultimately the product of a conspiracy of media magnates or secular humanist gurus. The more we study culture in its total context, the more we are impressed with the fact that it is the result of bil-
lions of separate choices by millions of people. As T. S. Eliot observed, culture “is the product of a variety of more or less harmonious activities, each pursued for its own sake: the artist must concentrate upon his canvas, the poet upon his typewriter, the civil servant upon the just settlement of particular problems as they present themselves upon his desk, each according to the situation in which he finds himself.”

Rarely if ever is the condition of a culture the product of deliberate decision, either by the society as a whole or by a group of social engineers, whether elected or self-appointed. Cultural development is something that occurs naturally rather than artificially. It is never contrived. To be sure, particular artifacts in popular culture (as well as in high culture) are the product of deliberate activity, but rarely is that activity intended to produce some huge, cultural effect. When the television was invented, it wasn’t because some malevolent engineers wanted to open a Pandora’s box for society. When Norman Lear decided to produce All in the Family, it was certainly a departure from television programming that had gone before, but no one could have predicted that the show would be accepted by the audience, and would in turn influence the standards of the audience. The viewers decided that for themselves. Perhaps the critics helped, but nobody has to listen to critics.

Those who condemn attempts at social engineering are correct in noting that all efforts to remake society (let alone human nature) are destined to fail because no would-be reformer of society has enough knowledge about all of the interrelationships of that complex reality called “society” to anticipate how tinkering with some of the parts will affect other parts and the whole. The belief that “planners” can predict what their efforts at reform will produce is what Friedrich Hayek calls the “fatal conceit.”

The same call to humility should be given to those of us who want to effect a change in culture. Cultural engineering doesn’t work. We can do very little to encourage or discourage cultural trends or fads. We can do something, however. As Eliot noted, “we can combat the intellectual errors and the emotional prejudices which stand in the way” of cultural change. That is, we can call attention to the folly or absurdity or outright sin that certain cultural phenomena encourage or facilitate. Eliot’s call to cultural humility is sobering, and is consistent not only with a realistic view of human culture, but with a Biblical view of the pervasiveness of human sin.

We should look for the improvement of society, as we seek our own individual improvement, in relatively minute particulars. We cannot say: “I shall make myself into a different person”; we can only say: “I will give up this bad habit, and endeavour to contract this good one.” So of society we can only say: “We shall try to improve it in this respect or the other, where excess or defect is evident: we must try at the same time to embrace so much in our view, that we may avoid, in putting one thing right, putting something else wrong.” Even this is to express an aspiration greater than we can achieve: for it is as much, or more, because of what we do piecemeal without understanding or foreseeing the consequences, that the culture of one age differs from that of its predecessor.

CULTURE AND BIBLICAL NORMS

In the next chapter, we will be looking at Biblical teaching about culture in general and about the general obligations of individual believers within an unbelieving culture. As we do that, we need to keep in mind what culture is. Applying Scripture to our individual experience is difficult for each of us, often as much because we fail to understand the significance of our own situation, the context in which we are applying it, as because we fail to understand the original, objective meaning of the text. We live in complex patterns of need, of opportunity, and of sin, and the inference we really ought to draw from Scripture is often the most difficult to see, because of the complexity and sin in our lives. This is why we need teachers and the fellowship of the saints.

The first thing we must do, and I’m afraid it is done all too little, is to come up with some principles for interpreting and applying the Scriptures to this huge abstraction called culture.
What sort of being is a culture? It’s not a person. It’s not even an institution, like the church or the state or the family. It is instead a dynamic pattern, an ever-changing matrix of objects, artifacts, sounds, institutions, philosophies, fashions, enthusiasms, myths, prejudices, relationships, attitudes, tastes, rituals, habits, colors, and loves, all embodied in individual people, in groups and collectives and associations of people (many of whom do not know they are associated), in books, in buildings, in the use of time and space, in wars, in jokes, and in food.

We can’t simplify things too quickly by isolating one of these cultural expressions and asking how Scripture applies to it in isolation from everything else, for then it’s not part of that social experience that’s called culture. We cannot, for example, evaluate the virtues and vices of fast food in our culture merely by looking at Biblical teaching about meals. We have to take into consideration the place of the automobile and highways in our culture, our view of time and convenience, the pressures on modern families (both those relieved and those exacerbated by fast food), the opportunity for employment created by this new service industry, and many other pieces of the cultural puzzle. We then have to ask, given all of the other forces that shape modern culture, whether eliminating McDonald’s from the equation would mean that people would automatically eat more nutritious home-cooked meals with the family gathered around the table, or whether they would eat more frozen TV dinners on their own unsynchronized schedules.

Having defined a specific cultural thing about which we are trying to draw inferences from Scripture, we can then try to place it in the context of what Scripture says about culture and the place of the Christian within a culture shared with unbelievers.

All the while, we need to keep in mind the Biblical call to wisdom. Living in a culture that is increasingly hostile to Christian living is one of the more consistent trials we will face. James quite clearly tells us that trials require wisdom, and if any of us lacks wisdom, we should ask God, and He will give it (1:5). The Biblical call to get wisdom is a thread that runs through much of Scripture. In commenting on the so-called “Wisdom Literature” in the Bible (i.e., Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes),

Derek Kidner notes that the tone of voice is very distinct from that in the Law and the Prophets.

The blunt “Thou shalt” or “shalt not” of the Law, and the urgent “Thus saith the Lord” of the Prophets, are joined now by the cooler comments of the teacher and the often anguished questions of the learner. Where the bulk of the Old Testament calls us simply to obey and believe, this part of it . . . summons us to think hard as well as humbly; to keep our eyes open, to use our conscience and our common sense, and not to shirk the most disturbing questions.16

Saying that wisdom calls us to think is hardly a denial of God’s authority, or to suggest that God is indifferent about what decisions we make. Pascal once said that the first of all moral obligations is to think clearly, and the Proverbs are quite emphatic that obedience to God requires “a disciplined and prudent life” (Proverbs 1:3), which must surely involve clear thinking.

Derek Kidner points out how the call to reflection that is represented by the Wisdom Literature is a recognition and reminder that God’s Law is imprinted in the very structure of creation.

This demand for thought presupposes a world that answers to thought. Not, to be sure, one which we can hope to master with our finite minds; but that is our limitation, not the world’s; for if it is a creation, and the product of perfect wisdom, it will be in principle intelligible. So even when the arrogance of human thought has to be rebuked . . . the Old Testament makes no retreat into notions of divine caprice; still less, of “a tale told by an idiot” or nobody at all. Instead, it sees God’s wisdom expressed and echoed everywhere — except where man, the rebel, has presumed to disagree and to disrupt the pattern.17

As we shall see in the following chapter, culture is regarded by Scripture as an extension of creation. It is, after all, fabricated by created (if fallen) human nature and created (if fallen) human
will, interacting with the necessities of living in the created (if fallen) world. The demand of Scripture to pursue wisdom by reflecting on revelation in creation (as well as in the Word) requires that we spend some time pondering human culture. We should “consider” the jaded television producer and the screaming fans of Michael Jackson, even as we consider the ant and the lilies of the field.

THREE

WOULD YOU TAKE JESUS TO SEE THIS PLANET?

AFTER THE SEVENTH DAY, BEFORE THE LAST DAY

Should the culture of Christians be separate from the culture of the unbelieving world? Should Christians isolate themselves from the culture around them, or should they be trying to take it over, or something in between? Is the culture we now share with unbelievers only a source of temptation and grief, or can it somehow be “redeemed”?

These are some of the fundamental questions we have to ask of Scripture. One thing that is clear at the outset is that, at this time in history, in God’s providential ordering of things, the covenant community of the people of God is scattered, dispersed within broader human cultures. Some of these cultures have been shaped to a significant degree by the Church; others have no Christian influence whatsoever. It was not always so. After the giving of the Law and before the coming of Christ, the people of God had a totally parochial and segregated culture. Israel was called to be holy and was given special instructions about how to exhibit that holiness in its culture, because their God was holy and they were a special people before God. Israel’s holy culture was a visible but partial recovery of the original holy culture in the Garden of Eden, and a foretaste of the holy culture God’s people will enjoy in eternity. The distinctiveness of the people of