



# Briefing

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## *Culture: Growth Towards Glory*

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### *INTRODUCTION*

Within the church, cultural activity is sometimes seen as legitimate only when it is a useful tool used directly in worship or evangelism. When a painting or piece of music carries a gospel message we can accept it, when it does not we often don't know how to evaluate it. Many whose works have brought considerable benefit to humankind or who have enlarged our enjoyment and understanding of our lives and of the creation around us have been vociferous in their rejection of the God of the Bible. How then does cultural achievement fit into the world picture of Christians?

### *CULTURE*

Let us begin by asking a basic question: What is culture, and are music, painting and literature the sole areas of cultural activity? Culture itself is that complex network of interlocking beliefs, attitudes, shared understanding and history which provides the framework from within which we view ourselves and the world.

For most people cultural activity is seen in aesthetic terms: the special things, particularly in the arts, which they enjoy, admire and praise, or think that they should. Thus ballet and the Booker Prize winners are seen as examples of cultural activity, *Eastenders* and the Renault Megane adverts are not. In this view culture is seen as something which, even whilst we are not too sure of it for ourselves, we would like our children to appreciate. At the other extreme, culture can be seen as a threat originating in the preoccupation of the supposed *avant garde* with the continual condemnation and under-mining of what is presently appreciated by ordinary people. Many react subconsciously with Goering when he said "When I hear the word culture I reach for my gun."

We need a more reasoned and fuller approach than these extremes. The Dutch Calvinist philosopher Herman Dooyeweerd gives us this helpful definition, "Cultural activity always consists in giving form to material in free control over the material. It consists in giving form according to free design." Whether with musical notes, words, pigments, stone or wood, some material is given new form under the free control of an Operator. Thus culture is not confined to the area of aesthetics, of something seen as peripheral or special and possibly superfluous which either enhances or threatens our experience of our environment. Cultural activity is more than the intellectual gingerbread of life, it is the cultivation and development of creation by humankind.

The real problem we face is not how Carl Orff could compose *Carmina Burana* or how Hugh MacDiarmid could write *A Drunk Man Looks at The Thistle* or how Claude Monet could paint *Haystack: Snow Effect*. The problem is not how the unusually good or unexpectedly worthy can be produced by men and women who are in rebellion against God. The problem is how ordinary women and men who try as much as possible to shut God out of their lives can continue to live those lives in harmony with God's creation. The

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difference between an aesthetically-uneducated man placing plaster ducks on the wall in an effort to beautify his living room and Charles Rennie Macintosh designing a complete house down to the smallest detail of the cutlery is a difference of scale not of motivating principle. Human cultural endeavour consists of the attempt to take what is already present in creation and in some form to fashion it so as to enhance life. This is true whether we are trying to interpret the essential character of another human being through the medium of oil paint on canvas or whether we are trying to scramble eggs; although of differing aesthetic import, both are cultural activities. The problem is not how can we achieve remarkable things but how we can function at all and to what purpose.

### *CULTURAL MANDATE*

Cultural activity, whether with spade or pen, is not only desirable for human well-being, it is activity desired by God. The first recorded Word of God to humankind concerns our part in the opening up of creation and has come to be known as the "Cultural Mandate" (Genesis 1:28-30, 9:1).

Through the cultural mandate, creation itself is subject to continuing cultural disclosure under the direction of God's co-workers, humanity. It is as lords of creation and servants of God with subservient authority that we are meant to participate in God's continuing unfolding of creation.

The American theologian Donald Bloesch describes culture as "the area that God has appointed for humans to realise their destiny in service to His glory."<sup>2</sup> Cultural activity, the development of the potentialities of creation, is something which we undertake in service to God. We cannot deny our cultivating task, because to be a human being means being a culturally-conditioned and covenanted creature before the Lord in the midst of his creation.

### *NATURE-GRACE*

In the service of God we make a ruinous error when we attempt to differentiate between activities which can be categorised as "spiritual" and "secular", a differentiation between areas of grace and nature.

*(a) Nature inhabits grace.*

When Christians gather in praise of God we tend, in obedience to Colossians 3:15, to sing our praise. To do this we use products of our created existence, our imagination in writing words and music and physical expertise in

constructing and playing musical instruments and singing. This is an offering to God dressed in the culture appropriate to our circumstances.

The cultural Amish - those who choose to absolutise a particular mode of cultural expression - and the culturally trendy - those who choose the frite and ephemeral - fail to glorify God or edify their souls in worship as they would wish. To sing badly to God, using hackneyed words or tunes, is to make an offering of less than our best and impoverishes our lives. To sing the heart-rending agony of Psalm 51 in the mawkishly introspective 17th century doggerel of the paraphrase in the Scottish *Metrical Psalter* is insulting to a soul confronting its own awful possibilities. Singing continual repetitions of banal choruses which fail to scratch the surface of the reality of our experience impoverishes the church. In worship cultural activity is unavoidable; to sing praise poorly is an attempt at cultural activity. Unfortunately it is poor culture.

*(b) Grace inhabits nature.*

The Christian is given a direct command to undertake her or his cultural activity as a service to God. In Ephesians 6:5ff, slaves are told to do their work, perform their cultural activity, as doing the will of God from their hearts. This applies to the believer on a croft digging a ditch just as it does to the believer standing before canvas brush in hand. Our activity within nature is to be undertaken as an activity of grace ventured before and in dependence upon God. There are no supposedly neutral areas of life, uncovenanted "black holes", within which we exist out of sight of God or areas where God does not care about our activity. If we attempt to create a split between our spirituality and the expression of our faith on the one hand and a supposedly a-Christian realm of cultural activity on the other, we impoverish all of our life.

### *REDEMPTION*

The real value of cultural endeavour does not lie in the intrinsic value of the artefacts produced. Throughout the historical process of human life and endeavour, God pursues his purpose of achieving his greatest work, the reclamation and renewal of all that he has created, in the power of Jesus Christ.

At the heart of history stands Christ, all that follows finds meaning in him. History, human development and cultural achievement are to

be viewed within a framework of Christ's redemptive work. It is not nature or history, not culture and achievement which are condemned by God, rather it is sin, and, through the sinless Christ, God restores nature and history, human culture and achievement. Christ, the second Adam, bears the wrath of God for us and fulfils on our behalf the cultural mandate given originally to the first Adam.

If we leave redemption at the salvation of the individual, however glorious this may be, we rob the concept of some of its richness and the wonder of its fulfilment. The command to work out our salvation with fear and trembling means we are to work out the results and effects of our salvation, to actualise what the presence of God means in our lives.

The cultural mandate, which is renewed in Christ Jesus, is redeemed and shall be perfected. In Romans, after proclaiming that we are the heirs of God (8:15-17), Paul goes on to develop something of the implications of their redemption, that it is a promise with significance for the entirety of creation (8:19-20). In the redemption of mankind we find that creation itself will be set free from its bondage to sin and know the fullness of its created potentials just as, and because, the children of God are set free.

### *UNBELIEVERS*

It is simple to see how every breath of the Christian is energised and inhabited by the Spirit and is breathed in dependence upon him. What, however, of the unbeliever? How are we to view the cultural activity of those who reject the Saviour?

We must acknowledge the presence of God's providential activity in the lives of those who reject him. Calvin warns that:

"If we regard the Spirit of God as the sole fountain of truth, we shall neither reject the truth itself, nor despise it wherever it shall appear, unless we wish to dishonour the Spirit of God. For by holding the gifts of the Spirit in slight esteem, we condemn and reproach the Spirit."<sup>3</sup>

Cultural activity when it is truly cultural activity, that is the unveiling of truth, should be regarded as the product of the work of the Holy Spirit, even in the lives of unbelievers. The artist, scientist or journalist, when she or

he uncovers and develops the truth of God's creation, is furthering the unfolding of creation's potentialities. Creation develops along historical lines, according to its God-given nature and character, under the influence of the Holy Spirit.

The Creator of heaven and earth maintains his creation despite the rebellion of human arbitrariness. If God's divine order were not sustained in the temporal cosmos, the whole of temporal reality would disappear. The human work of cultural formation remains bound to the structures inherent in God's creation. Even the most rebellious creature can only work within the givens of a creation sustained by the Spirit of God.

There is similarity between the cultural products of the regenerate and the unregenerate whether they are sculpting marble or designing an electric kettle. This is inevitable given the nature of creation.

Since all *fashioning* of the material, the good as well as the evil, is bound to the nature, the structure and the laws of this material, the result of the believer's work will, of course, always exhibit much similarity to that of the unbeliever. It is not the similarity of their divergent spirits but that of the stiffness and obstinacy of the *material*.<sup>4</sup>

That a human being has the wit to select the most suitable seeds, plant them and share the harvest with others is evidence that as a reasoning creature he is part of God's creation able to know himself and his environment even if that knowledge is distorted by the Fall. That the same person can select the best weapon in order to crush someone's skull because of a fancied slight is evidence that reason and motive are corrupted not that they have ceased to exist.

Although motivated by the spirit of the age, the unregenerate still live within God's creation and, by virtue of their own created status, cannot totally rebel against God without encompassing their own immediate self destruction.

God is faithful to his creation; he brought it into being, upholds and sustains it by his Holy Spirit, governs its existence through his loving law and in Jesus Christ has assumed the created in order to renew and transform it. Fallen creation, its structures and the law which we find in nature and special revelation are not to be dismissed as unworthy or of lesser importance in God's order of things. Rather they are to be accepted as part of the movement of God's

love in his purpose of redemption. As the object of God's love and redemption the created order is not to be shunned.

The cultural activity of God's creatures in the midst of his creation, under his overarching providence, is to be valued and understood as steps toward an ordained end. God is, through Christ the sole Mediator, reclaiming and recreating the cosmos which after the fall was subjected to corruption and stood in need of renewal. This redemptive activity of the Holy Spirit restores creation to its original purpose, the praise of the glory of God. The created will not be abandoned but renovated or recreated in glory.

That which is from the hand of God, although fallen, remains his. It is neither evil and liable to disintegrate into chaos nor a neutral substratum of value only in the partit plays as the theatre of human redemption. Rather creation is, in itself, the theatre of God's glory, power, wisdom and

goodness, and in the consummation of creation his glory, power, wisdom and goodness will be fully displayed.

The becoming creation with all its potential is the context and goal of our interactive relationship with the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who, through the work of his Holy Spirit, leads us to fulfilment. Creation itself is being redeemed. Just as humanity is the religious root of creation so the church, the very body of Christ upon earth, is the spearhead of the becoming creation. Our cultural activity, upheld by the Holy Spirit, is eschatological activity. Whilst not as directly primary in God's service as the saving of souls, our cultural activity is either a direct outworking of the Holy Spirit's activity in redemption in the life of the Christian or an outworking of the created structures which are sustained by the Holy Spirit leading to a glorious fulfilment in the coming again of Christ.

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