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Culture: From the Garden to the City

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And God made everything and saw that it was good. He made man and woman in His image and told them that it was their task to fill the earth and to subdue it. We were to fill the earth and make it a habitable place, a social place. We were not only to cultivate this garden, but also to preserve the North Pole and Canada and South Africa; to build our shelters where it was cold; to grow grain when we were hungry; to find out what we would do with metal and wood. Thus we find the beginning of culture already in paradise. There gardening (agriculture) but also family life was established. Adam composed poetry:

This is now bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
she shall be called "woman,"
for she was taken out of man.
(Gen. 2:25)

The beginnings of language appeared when Adam named the animals. Thus culture is man's obedience to the covenantal God; it is the result of human cultivation.

Culture is not just intellectual and aesthetic pursuit, as the term "a cultured person" might indicate. It is much more. "Culture," according to Walsh and Middleton, "covers the whole

range of human society. It includes not merely art, music, and scholarship, but also such things as our economic and political life, religion, the church, education, technology, the media, marriage, family, advertising and entertainment."¹ Culture then is the purposeful molding of the stuff of creation by people, on God's command. Henry Van Til formulates the term culture by stressing the two aspects of it:

...that activity of man, the image bearer of God, by which he fulfills the creation mandate to cultivate the earth, to have dominion over it and to subdue it. The term is also applied to the result of such activity, namely, the secondary environment which has been superimposed upon nature by man's creative effort.²

Culture comprises many components. Many of these are determined by climate and geography, by population density, and by the state of technology, but every person who participates in a culture is a cultural being, because culture forming is a God-ordained human task.

God had said that all of creation was at our disposal, except for one thing, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. But we disobeyed and we lost paradise. That did not mean that culture stopped. Jabal built tents; Jubal played the harp and flute; Tubal-Cain forged tools from bronze and iron. People learned to build with wood and to craft ships that floated on the waters. They learned how to make bricks and how to use tar for mortar. "Fill the earth," God had said, but they refused at one time to go further than the plain in Shinar. There they built this huge tower and wanted to make a name for themselves.

So God had to interfere. He confused human language, and consequently people scattered all over the earth and built various cultures, most of them not very obedient to the Lord. Later Abraham was called out to be made into a special nation with a God-glorifying culture, but that did not become an unqualified success either. To be sure, cities were built; the world learned about the might of Jahweh, but the rot

caused by the eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil kept working its way into culture; Jerusalem was built and destroyed and rebuilt and destroyed.

The chosen people were scattered all over the Middle-East, and a social setting without greed, warfare, and injustice was never established. Swords and spears were never consistently made into plowshares and pruning hooks. The prophet Isaiah warns therefore that a day of the Lord will be coming in which the pride of the human race will be brought low because culture is full of idols:

The Lord Almighty has a day in store
for all the proud and lofty,
for all that is exalted (and they will
be humbled),
for all the cedars of Lebanon, tall
and lofty,
and all the oaks of Bashan,
for all the towering mountains
and all the high hills,
for every lofty tower,
for every fortified wall,
for every trading ship
and every stately vessel.
The arrogance of man will be brought
low
and the pride of men humbled;
the Lord alone will be exalted in that
day,
and the idols will totally disappear.
(Isa. 2:17-18)

"Stop trusting in man," the Lord says, because everything will be taken away: your car, your home, your business or your spouse, your wits or your health, your books or your job. Walk with God and Him alone. He may even take away your Isaac.

What does that mean for our cultures? Is everything going to be annihilated? Is all vanity? Is the writing of books, the establishment of churches, all the academic endeavors, the communication systems, the arms build-up, the hunger relief effort, the holding of hands across America—is all of that in vain? Why then not eat, drink, and be merry, and forget about

marrying and working? What is the sense of utilizing our talents and subduing the earth if it is all doomed to failure? Can God not use any of our cultural efforts? Yes, He can and will.

The fact is that not all cultural endeavors are doomed to fail. The garden is going to be made into a perfect city, the Holy Jerusalem. It will take time, but John saw it in a vision from God: "I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband" (Rev. 21:2). The city will contain the "stuff" that the filling and subduing of the earth were made of. There is gold and jasper, and there are many precious stones (Rev. 21:18), "the wealth of the seas," and "the riches of the nation." "Herds of camels," we read in Isaiah 60, "will cover your land, your camels of Midian and Ephah. And all from Sheba will come, bearing gold and incense...."

The difference between the "old garden" and the new city is that all these cultural products of the nations have now been purified as by fire; they are transformed to proclaim the praise of the Lord. That which was our boastful pride is now used in the New Jerusalem, but cleansed of all haughtiness and sinful arrogance. And there is more, according to Isaiah 60:

All Kedar's flocks will be gathered to you,

the rams of Nebaioth will serve you;
they will be accepted as offerings on my altar,
and I will adorn my glorious temple.

(vs. 7)

The glory of Lebanon will come to you,

the pine, the fir and the cypress together,
to adorn the place of my sanctuary.

(vs. 13)

What Isaiah and John saw was a vision, a vision of hope of a city that will not be built until the Lord returns. And it is the Lord who purifies it, because the city was "coming down out of heaven from God" (Rev. 21:2). Abraham too, who lived in tents, "was looking forward

to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God" (Heb. 11:10). Common household articles will be made holy to the Lord. In Zechariah we read:

On that day HOLY TO THE LORD will be inscribed on the bells of the horses, and the cooking pots in the Lord's house will be like the sacred bowls in front of the altar. Every pot in Jerusalem and Judah will be holy to the Lord Almighty, and all who come to sacrifice will take some of the pots and cook in them. (Zech. 14:20,21)

What is crucial about these visions is that many of the cultural patterns and products which humans throughout history have developed and used, are to be found in the Holy City. Of course, many things that we now know will not be there: no May-Day parades or bombs bursting in air; no star-wars or NATO. In fact, there will be no church steeple of the CRC or the RCA; not the RC, the PCA, or the NRC.

There will be a wall and there will be gates but "on no day will its gates ever be shut" (Rev. 21:25). What is more, "The glory and honor of the nations will be brought into it. Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful" (Rev. 21:26,27). None of this is pie in the sky but the revelation of a promise that will come true.

That is the glorious future; but what about today? How can God possibly establish the works of our hand and of those of Gorbachev and Prime Minister Botha, of King Leopold and Mrs. Vanden Doe? If we look at the cultural patterns of this world, what good can possibly come out of them? What is there to choose between communism and capitalism in the eyes of God? Is our penal system anything to be proud of? Or have we overcome injustice and famine? Aren't abortion, pornography, and the lack of a balanced budget great problems of our days? Have we ever really subdued and preserved the earth, or have we mainly exploited creation and polluted it? Where have we as Christians made a positive impact into our shameful cultural

patterns?

How can God possibly use anything from our culture in the New Jerusalem? We don't know. We do know that God through His Son Jesus Christ redeemed His original good creation and that He continues to uphold, to guide and to rule this world. In spite of the fact that in some areas one out of two marriages end in divorce, marriage is an institution that will remain, and so will politics and mathematics, music and art, for God has put His laws to creation—not only the natural laws of heredity and motion, but also the laws, the norms, for culture and society.

What is our western culture like? First of all,

pay?" "Did they make money?" Economic security is the most important goal of Western man. This materialistic way of life leads to a God-less and idol-atrous society.

Human technology has in many ways become a monster, that masters human life rather than the reverse. Someone might push the wrong button; there may be a melt-down in the power plant. People think that they are building a tower to ignore heaven but their lives often lead to a Babel of confusion and nihilism. To be sure, many people see the danger in nuclear development and waste, showing great concern about pollution and genetic manipulation. But yet, despite the efforts of some nature

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contemporary men and women do not see themselves as stewards of the time and talents they have been given, of the resources of creation and recreation, but as *lords*; and therefore they set their own norms. They consider themselves not only creators but also redeemers. Technical development, or the faith in the redemptive power of science and technology, is always measured in economic terms. The final question is always, "Does it

lovers and movements such as Green Peace, there are reports that the damage done to nature by modern technology increases continually. Daily, certain species of plants and animals are becoming extinct. The main cause, of course, has to be found in egocentric human motives which often lead to brokenness which cannot be healed anymore.

Where do you and I fit into this technocratic culture? What influences can we as Christians

have on our culture, or should we establish our own cultural pattern? Scripture gives an important guideline in Paul's letter to the Romans: "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind" (Rom. 12:2). We are followers of the One who was despised and rejected, and we must not be afraid to suffer the same type of abuse. As Christians, we must try to rectify injustice wherever we see it and to share our wealth. In Hebrews we read:

Let us, then, go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore. For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come. Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that confess his name. And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.

(Hebrews 13:13-16)

So what can we do? What kind of Christians does this world need? First of all, we need to reemphasize the need for individual piety. We need to follow the narrow road; we need to confess over and over again that Christ died for me and that to live and to serve Him is grace. We need again knee-bending, closet-praying humility which asks, "Lord Jesus, have mercy on me, a sinner." We need to be much in prayer for forgiveness of personal sins of commission and omission. We need to marvel at the love of God. Only then can we encourage and discipline each other because we all need a great deal of grace. God wrote to the Colossians and us via Paul the following: "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God" (Col. 3:16).

Secondly, we should not try to do it alone. The Kingdom of God is a movement of people. Being a member of a large secular corporation, of a theater company, of a business or of an artistic circle, without proper backup from a

Christian community, usually results in one of two things: one either compromises one's Christian faith or one becomes so lonely that depression is the result.

Thirdly, wherever we are, we must try to rectify injustice, to soften suffering, and to feed the hungry.

And lastly, we must try to transform the culture of this present age by inviting war makers to become peace seekers; by proposing programs of racial justice; by trying to understand the multi-dimensionality of problems; by trying not to reduce all of life to economics. By endeavoring to do these things, we may be adding some mortar to the bricks for the Holy City.

ENDNOTES

¹Walsh, Brian, and Middleton, Richard. *The Transforming Vision: Shaping a Christian Worldview*. Downer's Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1984, p. 55.

²Van Til, Henry R. *The Calvinistic Concept of Culture*. Philadelphia: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1959, Preface.

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