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Plowing in Hope

Toward a Biblical Theology of Culture

David Bruce Hegeman

Canon Press
Moscow, Idaho

To Marjorie, my wife—
faithful culture-maker and cultivator
of our four thriving olive plants

David Bruce Hegeman, *Plowing in Hope: Toward a Biblical Theology of Culture*

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David Bruce Hegeman
Dallas, Oregon
September 1999

INTRODUCTION

"You are a man of culture."
—fortune cookie message
received by the author

The industrial valley of Cubarão, twenty-five miles southeast of São Paulo, Brazil, is reputed to be the most polluted place on earth. Free of all governmental regulations and business scruples dozens of chemical factories, steel mills, and manufacturing plants belch tons of lethal fumes into the air and continually pour various toxins into the nearby estuary. Such unmitigated dumping into the environment has taken its toll. The surrounding hills once covered with lush vegetation, now lie bare, punctuated here and there by the open scars of erosion. The river, once teeming with fish, is now an icy-black pool of death. It is as if William Blake's "dark Satanic Mills" have become a terrifying reality.

Nearly 12,000 miles away on the other side of the earth stand the magnificent Phoenix Hall (*Hōdō*) of the *Byōdō-in* Buddhist temple in Kyoto, Japan. Originally a palace, the main building is composed of an elaborate network of hand-carved timbers and interlocking brackets which hold up massive, cantilevered tiled roofs. Supported on stilts, the whole structure seems to float as if it were weightless. On a still spring day when the cherry blossoms are in bloom, the view of the temple across its reflection pond is said to be ravishingly beautiful. It is a paradigm of peace and inner harmony—the Buddhist ideal.

Whether beautiful or repulsive, uplifting or destructive, the effects of human habitation are everywhere to be seen across the whole surface of the earth. We call these durable effects of human habitation “culture.” Culture is the output of all human societies, the product of deliberate human activity. Wandering nomads, small agricultural communities or megalopolises—people in all situations throughout all history have made artifacts. These include texts (written or handed down orally), objects (tools, vessels, clothing, art objects, etc.), and structures (from fences to roads, grass huts to towering cathedrals). The intricate network of artifacts, and the activities and rituals which go into making them, form a society’s culture, no matter how primitive or sophisticated.

As Christians, we must never assume that culture “just happens” (the evolutionary view). Rather, as believers of God’s holy Word, we must assert that since “the LORD has established His throne in heaven, and His kingdom rules over all” (Ps. 103:19), “there is a time for every purpose and for every work” (Eccl. 3:17; cf. 3:1) which is determined and controlled by God (Is. 46:9–10; Dan. 4:35). Human beings are a part of God’s creation and are therefore under His divine rule. Made deliberately in God’s image (Gen. 1:27), men and women are inescapably intelligent, verbal, moral, and creative beings. How this plays out in man’s cultural endeavors will be explored in detail in part 1 of this book.

The breadth and diversity of human culture is astounding, reflecting the glorious superfluity of the Father’s magnificent creation. As God creates, so humans make. Our works are never as stupendous as the Father’s, yet they are still of great value. Tragically there is another dimension to the diversity we find in human cultural expression which goes beyond differences in style, temperament, utility, and type. There is the effect of sin. We see this played out in the horror of Cubatão. Since the fall of Adam we have rebelled against our Creator and our divine image has been distorted (but not destroyed). We still think and speak and will and make, but now, instead of glorifying God in all that we do, we conspire and curse and hate and destroy. Culture continues to exist but in ugliness and dissonance with the original good creation. Yet somehow there are artifacts which have some ap-

parent good. We see the splendor of the Phoenix Hall—the product of an unbelieving Buddhist culture—and wonder how something so beautiful can be built for such an ugly end. Yet it is so. In part 2 of this book we will examine the effect of sin on creation and culture-making, and explain how it is possible that non-Christians can make useful artifacts and what their place is in God’s plan. And we will explore the relationship between God’s redemptive purpose to save human beings and their culture-making. But first we will examine the definition of culture in some detail, provide a preliminary overview to culture’s place within the Bible, and briefly outline the Church’s historic response to culture.

BACK TO THE ROOTS

The word *culture* has come to take on a number of diverse meanings. One recent reference book defines culture as “the beliefs, behavior, language, and entire way of life of a particular time or group of people.” This, the most broad definition of the term, corresponds to a common use of the term in the field of anthropology. The definition continues, “The term also may have a more specific aesthetic definition and can describe the intellectual and artistic achievements of a society.” Hence, we commonly speak of a “cultured” person as one who is well versed in literature and the fine arts—a connoisseur. Herein lies the clever irony of the fortune cookie message quoted at the start of this section. According to the broad definition of culture, it reads as a tautology: all men are men of culture by definition! Read according to the second definition, the message is sly flattery. One is tempted to respond, “Well, thank you for recognizing my extraordinary personal virtues in this area . . .” No doubt this kind of missive sells a lot of Chinese food!

The word *culture* is derived from the Latin *cultura*, which is the past participle of the verb *colere*, meaning *to plow or till*. *Cultura* was normally used in agronomic contexts to denote the cultivation—the active care or tending—of plants or animals. Hence we speak of *agri-culture* as the care of the soil to grow crops (*agros* = field, in Greek). The term could also be used in a religious context to mean *worship*. The idea here seems to be that in the same way the farmer actively fusses over his crops, so the

worshiper gives rapt attention to the deity he serves. Thus the term is closely related to the Latin *cultus* meaning *adoration* or *veneration*. The English language retains this connection with such terms as *cult*, *cultic*, *occult*, etc.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the word *culture* was not introduced into the English language until the fifteenth century, via Old French. Originally it was used strictly in the agricultural sense, with a special focus on breeding (husbandry). It was not until the following century that the term began to be used in the figurative sense to describe the development of the mind: rendering improvement or refinement by education or training. Farming was used as a metaphor for the educational process. Thus Thomas Hobbes spoke of the education of children as "a culture of their minds." By the 1800s (when the ideals of Enlightenment humanism had taken hold of Western society) the term *culture* came to mean *the state of being refined in mind, tastes, and manners, and to the intellectual side of civilization* (corresponding to the second definition of culture cited at the beginning of this section). Matthew Arnold, an outspoken proponent of this idea of culture, is often quoted as stating that culture is "the acquainting ourselves with the best that has been known and said in the world."

By the end of the nineteenth century, culture began to be used to denote more generally the whole way of life of a group or society, not just its better achievements (corresponding to the first definition of culture cited in this introduction). This can be called the anthropological sense of culture. At first a vestige of the agricultural metaphor of growth was retained. The older, Arnoldian idea of culture became "high" culture, aboriginal societies were referred to as "primitive" cultures, the Western middle class was referred to as "low" culture, etc. But as anthropology came to embrace a more egalitarian, relativistic outlook, there was a corresponding insistence that all cultures were equally legitimate and should be valued as such. At this point the agricultural metaphor was lost; there was no difference to be seen in the societal equivalents of seedlings and mature, fruit-bearing plants.

Such a cultural outlook is sharply opposed to the inescapable curative order of growth and development established by God in creation. I will therefore argue in part 1 of this book that the

Bible implicitly, yet unequivocally, teaches that: (1) there is (and ought to be) real cultural development; (2) occupational differentiation and societal stratification are necessary in order to meet God's command for global cultural development; and (3) some artifacts are recognized as having greater value because they are more intellectually and aesthetically refined and made with greater skill. Cultural egalitarians tacitly recognize this difference even when they use a word processor to compose one of their anarchistic essays (rather than using a typewriter or writing it out longhand) or take pleasure in a glass of fine imported wine.

While I readily agree with the definition of culture as the overall way of life of a given human society (including both its common and intellectually advanced elements), the view of culture used in this book will focus on culture as a concrete phenomenon. As Henry Van Til proposes, culture is "the secondary environment which has been superimposed upon nature by man's creative effort." Thus I define culture as *the product of human activity of concretization undertaken in the developmental transformation of the earth according to the commandment of God*. I favor this view of culture in this way because this definition highlights culture as a specific class of actions human beings perform upon God's original creation. A real change must take place on the earth or culture has not occurred. Culture is not an activity to keep mankind occupied until something else (presumably better) happens. It has a particular God-ordained end in view: the development of the earth into a global network of gardens and cities in harmony with nature—a glorious garden-city. Moreover, the process of cultural development has a basic temporal/progressive aspect: late cultures build upon and utilize the insights, technology, motifs, etc., of antecedent cultures as an important part of their cultural endeavors. This can only take place if artifacts from earlier cultures are somehow known or continue to exist. The more ephemeral aspects of a culture are not necessarily less important or less valuable, but if lost, they cannot make an impact on subsequent human societies.

Henry Van Til is credited with coining the aphorism *culture is religion externalized*. We must be careful how we interpret this phrase. If we assume by these words that religion is an internal private affair which occasionally becomes externalized when

interfaces with culture, we have missed the point. Our Christian faith is to affect all areas of our life in obvious, overt ways (Matt. 5:13–16). Van Til was describing an inevitable process: artifacts necessarily reveal the worldview of the individual or group who makes them (“by their fruits you will know them”—Matt. 7:20). Thus culture is the concrete expression of a society’s religious and philosophical commitments; it flows out of the heart—as it were—of the society which produces it (Prov. 4:23).

BIBLICAL TERMINOLOGY

Culture is in evidence throughout the pages of Scripture. Nearly every page speaks of farming or buildings or singing or commerce or religious rituals or the like. In fact, the Bible is itself a product of culture. The Bible is both fully the Word of God and fully the writings of human authors. As the Word of God, Scripture is over culture and offers an infallible, perfect standard by which all cultures are to be judged and evaluated. Yet as texts authored by believing human beings providentially prepared and moved by the Holy Spirit (2 Pet. 1:20–21), these works flow out of the cultural language, perspective, customs, idioms, and literary forms of the society from which they emerge. The inescapability of culture was no less true for the covenant community of the Old and New Testaments.

While the Bible has a great deal to say about culture (indeed, this book purports to be a *biblical theology* of culture), curiously, the Bible has no Hebrew or Greek equivalent for the English term *culture*. (The word *culture* does not appear in most English translations of the Bible.) The closest term in the NT Greek is the word *ethos*, which is usually rendered *custom* or *habit*. It is used in the NT to refer to the religious customs or traditions of the Jews (Luke 1:9; 2:42; John 19:42; Acts 6:14; 15:1; 26:3; 28:17); to the customs of societies outside the covenant (Acts 25:12); or to one’s personal “customs” (i.e., habits: Luke 4:16; Acts 17:2; Heb. 10:25). As such, *ethos* refers to the normal way of doing things and often has a moralistic temper (i.e., the way things *ought* to be done). The term is always used in a descriptive (rather than prescriptive) sense in the NT and refers to human practices or actions, not to the products of a society.

Another Greek term that is similar in many ways to our English word *culture* is *paideia*. Derived from the Greek word for *child*, it refers to the training process of children and by extension, to their intellectual development. Thus *paideia* came to refer to culture in the sense of a body of learning or knowledge. (The other main use of *paideia* is *discipline* or *chastisement*. This is its primary use in the NT; e.g., Luke 23:16, 22; 1 Cor. 11:32; Heb. 12:5ff.) The use of *paideia* that is closest to the cultural sense of the term occurs in Acts 7:22 when Stephen says that Moses “was learned [*paideioun*] in all the wisdom [*sophia*] of the Egyptians.” By the standards of the royal Egyptian court, Moses was a *cultured* man. While *paideia* is a close equivalent to our word *culture*, it is different in that in some contexts it only refers to intellectual accomplishments.

There is no such correlate in the OT Hebrew. However it is most interesting to observe that the Hebrew word *abad*, usually rendered “work,” “till/cultivate,” “serve,” or “worship” in English translations (see the extensive discussion of this term in part I), shares a nearly identical range of meanings with the Latin *colere*, from which our word *culture* is derived (see discussion in the previous section of this introduction). The OT concept of work and our contemporary idea of culture are closely related. This only serves to amplify the importance that the early chapters of Genesis, and in particular Genesis 2:15, have concerning a biblical theology of culture. Mankind’s call to *work* the ground is crucial to human self-understanding and self-purpose.

CULTURE AND THE COVENANT COMMUNITY

A quick scan of Church history will show that there has been a great deal of confusion on what the Christian response to existing culture should be. This is amply summarized in H. Richard Niebuhr’s classic book *Christ and Culture*. Niebuhr’s insightful analyses of historical positions on the issue is without parallel. He groups the major Christian responses to culture under the headings of “Christ against culture,” “Christ of culture,” “Christ above culture,” “Christ and culture in paradox,” and “Christ the transformer of culture.” Thus he accounts for such divergent approaches to culture from those of the Anabaptists and the Church of Rome to the views of Tertullian, Augustine, and Luther.

Anyone interested in a Christian understanding of culture should read this book, even though it has strong neo-orthodox overtones (see the Recommended Reading List on page 123).

The heart of the confusion on this issue undoubtedly stems from the apparently conflicting perspectives on culture presented by the Old and New Testaments. I am fully convinced that there is no contradiction in the Scriptures on this issue (or on anything else for that matter); that the view of culture put forth in each testament makes perfect sense given the context in which they were written; and that taken as a whole, the Bible presents an unabashedly positive view of culture as a human undertaking.

The cultural perspective of the OT is one of *cultural transparency*. Although the nation of Israel was clearly aware of the surrounding pagan cultures, Israel was essentially a closed society and set out (with varying degrees of success) to develop obediently—according to the laws and precepts revealed through Moses and the prophets—the good land God had mercifully given to them. The Israelites did not set out self-consciously to make a *Hebrew* culture in contrast to the cultures of the other nations. Rather they focused on being faithful, in order to foster a culture which was fully in agreement with the teachings of Scripture. There clearly was a distinctively biblical Hebrew culture, although the OT covenant community did not spend much time ruminating on this fact as such.

The same is true of those Christian cultures which have been able by God's mercy to establish a full-blown society founded on scriptural principles. Here the cultural expression is Christian even if the members of that culture do not actively use the phrase "Christian culture." This fact is often lost on theologians, even those who should know better. For example, Reformed pastor Michael Horton in his book *Where in the World Is the Church?* asks, "Were great writers and artists of past centuries, like Milton, Bunyan, Handel, and Rembrandt, pioneers of 'Christian literature and art,' or were they simply Christians who created good art?" (p. 82). Horton then goes on to dismiss the notion of developing a specifically Christian aesthetic, literature, or musical form (pp. 32, 83ff). I would heartily agree with Dr. Horton that many believers who, for example, set out to write "Christian" novels end up with mediocre products which are (or should be)

embarrassing to the Church. I would propose that the problem here is a truncated, shallow understanding of the term *Christian* and a fundamental ignorance of doctrine, which is rampant among today's evangelicals; the problem is not the use of the adjective as such. These so-called "Christian" novels are in reality *sub-Christian*.

C. S. Lewis framed the problem this way:

The word *religion* is extremely rare in the NT or the writings of the mystics. The reason is simple. Those attitudes and practices to which we give the collective name *religion* are themselves concerned with religion hardly at all. To be religious is to have one's attention fixed on God and one's neighbor in relation to God. Therefore, almost by definition, a religious man, or a man when he is being religious, is not thinking about religion: he hasn't the time. (emphasis original)

If Rembrandt would have been puzzled by the question of whether or not he was a Christian artist (p. 86), it would have only been because he was not (presumably) accustomed to thinking in these terms. (Lewis might say that he was too busy with his art to dwell self-consciously on his Christian faith.) Faithful artists in Calvinistic Holland took their biblical worldview (but not their salvation!) for granted; thinking and working in biblical terms was simply who they were. There was no pagan or secularistic opposition to their faith that stirred them to think in terms of Christian versus non-Christian culture. (If anything, Reformed artists would have thought in terms of being Protestant artists rather than Romish during Rembrandt's epoch. A point to ponder: Did their failure to see their culture in self-consciously Christian terms contribute to the Dutch society's fall from grace by the nineteenth century?)

It was exactly this sort of ideological, pagan opposition to the faith—in the form of Hellenism—that formed the cultural backdrop of the NT. Thus the dominant cultural perspective of the NT is one of *cultural antithesis*. It is within this context that the apostles urged believers to avoid the world (e.g., James 4:1-1 Jn 2:15f) and warned that the things of this world could be dangerous distraction (Matt. 13:22; Luke 18:22). At first reacting, these passages seem to teach that believers should withdraw from cultural endeavors as much as possible. An emphasis o

these Scripture texts has led to the ascetic tradition within Christianity; this is embodied in many monastic orders and in the Anabaptist movement. But taking the whole of the NT into the mix, we see that the term *world* cannot in these negative passages refer to the physical earth (1 Cor. 5:10); rather it refers to the whole sinful social order that is in systematic rebellion against God. The apostles urged Christians not to be conformed to the common beliefs and values of a pagan society but, rather, to have the totality of their thoughts shaped by the doctrines of Scripture alone (Rom. 12:2). The NT emphatically teaches that the physical things of this world are good and to be enjoyed within the bounds of God's law (Luke 7:34; John 2:10; 1 Cor. 10:3; Col. 2:20ff; 1 Tim. 4:3-4). The NT writers did not oppose the OT desire to found a culture based on scriptural principles. They recognized that Christians, faced with a hostile, blatantly anti-Christian society, must remove themselves from the harmful effects of that society as much as possible, especially when political and social circumstances make the forming of a biblical society on a national scale impractical. When faced with such a prospect, Christian culture must begin on a small scale as a faithful counter-culture (Matt. 5:14-16; Zech. 4:10).

Niebuhr's book primarily deals with the Christian response to existing cultures rather than culture-making as a particular relationship with the earth. While the issue of the covenant community's response to the culture they live in is of critical practical importance, it misses an important point. (Most evangelicals have correctly agreed with Niebuhr's "Christ the transformer of culture" position and have focused their cultural efforts on working with existing cultural forms, co-opting or re-working them, with mixed results.) The primary focus of our cultural efforts must be our call to transform the earth, not to transform the existing culture, although this, when performed according to biblical principles, is a lawful, worthwhile activity. We would also do well to avoid the prevailing "culture war" view: culture seen as an ideological/religious struggle between good and evil, godly and rebellious art, literature, politics, philosophy, etc. While we must never lose sight of the *antithesis* and Paul's call for us to "take every thought captive to the obedience of Christ" (2 Cor. 10:4-5), we must assert that culture is, at its

foundation, about *building* and not about *conflict*. Doing culture from a positive, earth-transformational perspective will help us build a more comprehensive, radical, holistic culture in line with the principles of Scripture, and it will provide us with less opportunity to compromise with the anti-biblical values and beliefs embedded in the pagan, unbelieving cultures we might encounter.

TOWARD A BIBLICAL THEOLOGY OF CULTURE

Geerhardus Vos in *Biblical Theology* observes that one of the key components of the discipline of biblical theology is that it seeks to study God's character, purposes, actions, and revelation *within history*—as they have been unfolded in time:

[Biblical Theology] differs from Systematic Theology, not in being more Biblical, or adhering more closely to the truths of the Scriptures, but in that its principle of organizing the Biblical material is historical rather than logical... Biblical Theology deals with the material from the historical standpoint, seeking to exhibit the organic growth or development of the truths of Special Revelation from the primitive pre-redemptive Special Revelation given in Eden to the close of the NT canon." (p. v-vi)

This book sets out to be a biblical theology of culture. Beginning with God's commands to Adam and Eve in the first two chapters of Genesis and ending with the disclosure of the New Jerusalem in the closing chapters of Revelation, this book examines culture within its redemptive-historical context. In fact, I have found it helpful to see culture operating within two broad strands of history which are decreed and ruled by God: *Culturative history* (the history of the process of culture) and *Redemptive history* (the history of human salvation wrought by God). I should stress at the outset that these two strands of history are not unconnected from one another, but since the Fall, they have been closely intertwined and in some instances (i.e., the building of the tabernacle and the Temple) have been identical. Nevertheless these two historical strands must be considered separately for at least two reasons. First, man's "cultural mandate"—the call to rule, fill, and transform the earth—was established before the Fall and exists independently of man's need for redemption. God clearly had an initial, basic plan for the development of the newly

created earth, which included mankind's cultural involvement. Since this plan was instituted prior to the fall of man into sin, we may properly call culture (along with the other "pre-redemptive" institutions of marriage and worship) *normative* for mankind. Second, it becomes clear both in the pages of Scripture and by historical observation (for example the *Byōdō-in* temple discussed at the opening of this introduction) that it has pleased God to allow a significant portion of the cultural development of the earth to be effectuated by those outside the covenant. Although the better of these works are destined by God to be taken away from unbelievers and given to the elect for their godly use, nevertheless it seems best to say that these cultural efforts stand outside of (separate from) redemptive history. Part 1 of this book, "A Positive Theology of Culture," outlines the basic scriptural teachings on God's plan and purpose for culture; it relies primarily on the early chapters of Genesis.

Of course things changed very soon after the cultural mandate was proclaimed by God. The Fall introduced the need for redemption and a Redeemer in order for mankind to continue in a state of fellowship (rather than wrath) with God. From the "mother promise" of Genesis 3:15 to the establishment of a renewed people on the New Earth in the eternal presence of God and the Lamb who was slain, we see the divine initiative to save mankind unfurled in redemptive history. Here we see God not merely restoring mankind to a holy state of worship and fellowship through the shed blood of Jesus Christ but also restoring mankind that he might fulfill with perfection the original cultural mandate. This relationship between culture and God's redemptive acts, and culture's place within the restoration of the earth is outlined in part 2, "Culture and Redemption."

In a brief concluding postscript, "Culture and the Sabbath," I try to demonstrate how the sabbath is a holy day of worship and feasting and an emblem of the eternal rest from sin and toil we will enjoy on the New Earth; the sabbath was instituted by God as a constant reminder of the goodness of creation and work (Ex. 20:11) and of man's need for liberation from his slavery to sin and misery in this present fallen world (Deut. 5:15). The sabbath serves as a vital means of contrast between man's calling to work (*culture*) and man's calling to worship (*cultus*). Even in this

distinction of days, we see that, ideally, our work is to be done in a worshipful manner and that our worship is enhanced by cultural products. I propose that this twofold distinction was not present before the Fall: man's cultural work was to be perfect, utterly transparent worship directed to the Creator. At the Fall, this transparency was broken. But it will be restored again when we are ushered into the glorious New Jerusalem, to serve God once again in Paradise—perfectly free from sin and toil—as kings and priests and culture-makers, to the everlasting glory of God.

The basic points I observe about culture are summarized in ten propositions. These are explored in parts 1 and 2 of this book. I have tried to bolster my arguments with numerous biblical texts, many of which have been printed out in full. I implore you to read this book with your Bible open, to examine these texts in their context (as well as the others that are only cited) to see if they do in fact say what I propose about man's cultural mandate (Acts 17:11). It is my prayer that this book will help the bride of Jesus Christ recover her vital call to rule, fill, work, and preserve the earth as a high and indispensable priority. Culture-making is not optional; it is a command which from the very beginning has never been revoked. May we—by God's grace!—be allowed to build a culture worthy of our Redeemer's precious Name.