

# The Tattooed Jesus

What Would the Real Jesus Do with Pop Culture?

**Kevin Swanson**



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## Preface

Christian conservatives are finally admitting that they have lost the political war in this country. They are on the “losing side of the cultural war.”<sup>1</sup> There is no point in fighting the political wars, if they fail to engage the cultural wars. And, there is no use fighting the cultural wars, if they have already lost the faith and the substance of a Christian worldview. Why fight the political battles when the millennial generation is far more likely to accept homosexual marriage, socialism, and evolution?<sup>2</sup>

I understand the reticence to fight these battles. The cultural battles are more controversial, more difficult, more personal and more fundamental than the political battles. They are more likely to offend our own children and our friends. They force us to confront larger problems and more fundamental problems that involve the social, educational, and cultural institutions that we have grown up with. The cultural icons are impregnable. Conservative Republicans are more committed to Disney than they are to the homosexual agenda. Yet what these conservatives refuse to accept is that Disney is more committed to the homosexual agenda than they are to the Democratic Party.<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps more is at stake here. In the cultural wars, we fight for our own children, our families, and what remains of the church of Christ. Political forces take our money, but they cannot as easily take our souls. They readily permit evil men to do more evil, but they cannot as easily coerce a righteous man to evil. The same cannot be said for the cultural forces. In the political war, the enemy presents itself in true colors. It is much harder to discern the enemy in the cultural war.

Dare I say it? The cultural war tests the true commitment of the human

heart. Politics is the business of hypocrisy. Conservatives grudgingly admit to it, and liberals build monuments to their hypocrisy. However, the cultural war eschews hypocrisy from the outset. The battle requires men and women who are honestly and consistently committed to truth and righteousness, or there is no war.

The cultural war is evident all around us, every day. The political war engages mainly during the fall months every year or so. The cultural antithesis is so manifestly accessible that you could spit out the window and hit some Goliath or another.

It's about time for a book about culture—a book that engages the cultural war where the battle is joined with the greatest intensity and relevance. What Christians need is a delineation of the battle lines in Hollywood and Nashville. They need to know what questions to ask, how worldviews are represented in culture, how to recognize trends, and how to discern between that which is good and that which is evil. Where discerning Christians avoid syncretism in worldview and culture, there remains hope that Christian faith and life will still thrive during the decline and fall of the Western world.

## Introduction

When Miley Cyrus rode a wrecking ball in the buff for a recent music video, it didn't take a PhD in Cultural Studies to interpret the message. Western culture is committing suicide. The last few living culture critics, including feminist writer Camille Paglia, are complaining of Pop culture's artlessness, sexlessness, and self-destructiveness. Paglia suggests that Lady Gaga, the other major popular star of the day, may be the "exhausted end of the sexual revolution."<sup>1</sup> Decadence is now crossing over into self-immolation, and Pop stars like Miley Cyrus and Lady Gaga are taking billions of people with them. A society cannot remain fixated on decadence forever. Eventually, it must advance to the next logical step—suicide—unless, of course, God has mercy.

The avant garde was trying to tell us that it was over when Andy Warhol painted the Soup Can and somebody paid \$15 million for it.<sup>2</sup> But it took another fifty years for the rest of the masses to get the message. The "Pop culture machine" has helped the process immensely.

Back in the 20th century, T.S. Elliot predicted the end of culture with the end of Christian culture:

"It is in Christianity that our arts have developed; it is in Christianity that the laws of Europe—until recently—have been rooted. It is against a background of Christianity that all of our thought has significance. An individual European may not believe that the Christian faith is true, and yet what he says, and makes, and does will all spring out of his heritage of Christian culture and depend upon that culture for its meaning... I do not believe that culture of Europe could survive the complete disappearance

of the Christian faith. And I am convinced of that, not merely because I am a Christian myself, but as a student of social biology. If Christianity goes, the whole culture goes. Then you must start painfully again, and you cannot put on a new culture ready made. You must wait for the grass to grow to feed the sheep to give the wool out of which your new coat will be made. You must pass through many centuries of barbarism. We should not live to see the new culture, nor would our great-great-great-grandchildren: and if we did, not one of us would be happy in it.”<sup>3</sup>

## ISLANDS

As the fires burn the last remains of Western civilization to the ground, one wonders if there will be anything left to salvage. T.S. Elliot seemed to think that only barbarism would survive. However, I wonder... what if there were a few Christians left? What if there were Christians who created the occasional oasis of culture in the wasteland of “empty cisterns and exhausted wells.” What if there were faith, hope, and love somewhere in the world? Then perhaps our children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren would thrive in it.

This shift began with the great Christian apostasy. There was first a reversal in the mind of Western man regarding the nature of reality, truth, and ethics. It was a change in worldview, wherein doubt prevailed and truth faded. There was not the faintest possibility of an absolute in the mind of post-modern man. He had lost contact with reality, and he could no longer identify a transcendent purpose for life. A hundred years later, the culture changed to better fit the zeitgeist: the predominant worldview of the age.

I am hopeful, because I believe that there are islands of community, culture, and freedom already forming. Wherever islands of a Christian social order reappear, a distinctly Christian culture may also develop. When the cultural Titanic begins to sink, there are always “life-raft manufacturing centers.” Some may prefer to work the “duct-tape repair units” in the engine room of the ship. At some point, however, the focus must shift to the life rafts. That is what is happening now.

There is still something to salvage. For one thing, Western culture still retains some remnants of 2000 years of Christian heritage. A headlining



Broadway and Las Vegas show in the 2010's celebrates fornication, and employs the provocative title *Rock of Ages*. Sure, 99.8% of the attendees will have forgotten the old hymn written by Augustus Toplady. To this day, the walls of these humanist empires yet bear the faint marks of a Christian heritage. There is always something that remains, something to strengthen (Rev. 3:2). Empires will come and go, but the empire of the Son continues. Here we find the raw materials upon which to rebuild Christian culture. When everything appears to be rotting and dying around us, something still lives. There will always be a remnant to plant the gardens in the ashes of what used to be a Christian civilization. This was the conclusion of another book I wrote, called *Apostate*.<sup>4</sup>

### WHY I WROTE THIS BOOK

I wrote this book because I wanted to read a book that discussed culture, confronted culture, and saved something of Christian culture. As a young man in my 20s, I was fairly well immersed in popular culture through secular radio and film. I worked as a disc jockey on a number of radio stations, covering Adult Contemporary, Rock, Country, Oldies, and Contemporary Christian genres.

Though the influence of popular culture, Country music, and Hollywood films is ubiquitously shot through our society, there has been too little interaction and confrontation with it on the part of Christians. I couldn't find a single book in Christian book stores that dealt with the broader questions addressing artistic media. So, it was with some trepidation I embarked on this study. Cultures are not easily interpreted or analyzed. To say that all popular culture is of the devil is a false statement and produces a weak position. We have had enough of sham religion from those who have attempted to address this cultural milieu without cogent biblically-based ethical arguments. To consign all of Western culture to the devil also ignores the 2000-year reign of Jesus Christ.

However, to *not* interact with modern culture is even more dangerous. The cosmic battle of worldviews takes place right here. The principalities and powers, the rulers of the darkness of this world with which we wrestle (Eph. 6:12), are the trillion dollar institutions and the cultural icons in the West. As I will point out in this book, it was critical for the present apostasy that The Beatles kicked off their career in the choir of their local Anglican parish church. It was critical that Miley Cyrus was

baptized into the Southern Baptist church in 2006, and that Katy Perry was raised by her Christian pastor father and mother in Santa Barbara, California. Popular culture reflects the apostasy, because that is the zeitgeist of the Western world.

There is much material that address a Christian worldview, as contrasted with other prevalent worldviews of the day. But these are hardly useful to the masses, unless they connect the dots between the worldview and the cultural incarnations. Most people do not sit and study worldviews all day, but they will go to the movies and listen to Top 40 radio stations. Unless Christian families can properly see the connections between cultures and the worldviews they reflect, many more will be “spoiled by philosophies and vain deceit after the traditions of men.” (Col. 2:5). My objective is to work the salvage operation, as we protect and preserve the Christian faith in the West.

# 1: Following the Trajectory

From Patty Page to Lady Gaga

As I walked into the Christian Booksellers Association convention some eight years ago, I was immediately greeted at the entrance by a vendor sporting the trademark, “Good Newz Tattoos.” This scene gave me pause to think. In the “cool” Jesus vernacular of the day, I ask the simple question, “WWJT?” What would Jesus tattoo? Would He tattoo Leviticus 19:28 on his left thigh, for example? Would He wear one earring or two? Would He wear a “No Fear” t-shirt? Would He wear skinny jeans? Would He endorse *Batman Begins*? Would He play fantasy football? Would He buy a Dallas Cowboys season pass? What would Jesus do?

These do seem to be important questions, although they may make us a little uncomfortable. Do any of these musings smack of blasphemy, or are they reasonable considerations? Sincere Christians have arrived at widely differing conclusions concerning these matters, as evidenced in the diversity of cultural expressions found in Western Christianity today. Indeed, many professing Christians do believe that Jesus would tattoo Leviticus 19:28 on his left thigh, pierce his head with metal studs, and cremate His family members upon their death. Other professing Christians would be horrified by such a suggestion. One cannot help but wonder if sincere people who call themselves Christians may be holding to different Christs or different religions altogether. Of course, it is possible, but how does this apply here? Is this what characterizes the surviving remnants of religion in the West? Christ said that there would be false Christs who would appear in the “last days” which very well may apply to the day in which we live (Matt. 24:5, Mark. 13:21-22). There is the Christ who is “accepting” of homosexual activity and another Christ who hates homosexual activity. There is the Christ who

loves homosexuals and the Christ who hates homosexuals. There is the Lord Jesus Christ who sits on a throne and calls nations to repentance, and then there is the Jesus who accepts everybody just the way they are. Then, there is another Jesus who bears more resemblance to a Mexican drug lord named “Jesus.” He makes people feel good.

### WILL THE REAL JESUS PLEASE STAND UP?

The question posed is a serious one. Would Jesus tattoo Leviticus 19:28 on his left thigh? Forty years ago, the answer to the question would hardly be debatable, if the question was ever asked. However, those who are still associated with the Christian faith today are interested in these sorts of questions, in part because this is the age of apostasy. Very little of the Christian faith has survived in Europe (at least if you believe the news reports and the statistical studies covering church attendance and baptisms), and North American Christianity is fading rapidly. Families who do not want to apostatize from the faith still want to know what the faith looks like. Our faith does more than assent to propositions, such as the historical fact of Christ’s resurrection. Persons who believe in the resurrection will live in a manner that reflects that belief.

The organized Christian church in the West has very much unraveled. Most protestant sects (Mennonite, Episcopal, Presbyterian, Methodist, Baptist, Lutheran, etc.) have compromised on homosexual weddings, female pastors, evolution, and a hundred other corrupting apostasies. Would these churches make similar mistakes regarding other cultural elements including motion pictures, popular music, clothing, body piercing, and tattoos? Which cultural forms represent apostasy and which represent a commitment to orthodoxy? These are important questions to those of us who want our children and grandchildren to be part of the Christian church in the year 2060. What would the real Jesus think of Lady Gaga’s music? What would the real Jesus think of the evangelical pastor who tattooed a dragon across his back and neck? Would the real Jesus wear a Broncos jersey? Why didn’t Joseph of Arimathea cremate the real Jesus? If a tree is known by its fruits, at what point does a culture reveal the fruits of complete apostasy from the Christian faith?

Much has changed in just fifty years. The facades came down in the last half century and cultural expressions now more closely reflect the true worldview commitment at heart. Until the middle of the 20th century,

England and America still “looked” Christian on the outside, even though the foundational view of knowledge and reality within these nations had changed significantly. By the turn of the 21st century, most of these facades had come down. Now that the Western apostasy is in full force in Europe and North America, many have adopted a different worldview. They have taken on a man-centered epistemology, metaphysic, and ethical perspective. They may still call themselves “Christians,” but their basic worldview is humanist at its core. Shifting worldviews eventually yield different cultural accretions. Naturally, a post-Christian world will come to *look* post-Christian as the years advance. That is what we would expect.

Francis Schaeffer famously remarked that one gets a worldview like he gets the measles. The fellow is not sure how he picked it up, but sure enough, he has the measles. If the doctor were to examine him, certain spots on the skin would clearly indicate he has the disease. If the patient bears symptoms of the measles, it is a good bet that he has the measles. In a similar sense, a culture provides external evidence of the disease that ravages the body of society. In order to correctly identify a worldview, it is helpful to study culture and better understand connections between culture and worldview. In many ways, the culture is the best and only way to correctly identify a worldview. For one thing, people are not always truthful in their confessions. They may say that they believe in God and the resurrection of Christ, for example, but in life practice they deny it. Thus, it is better to examine a man’s culture than his stated beliefs. Far too many claim the name of Christ, but deny Him by their works. When Christ speaks of works, He is referring to habits, lifestyle, priorities, assorted applications of law, and in a word, culture.

Most Christians today get a little “Jesus” at church, but they pick up their worldview from their school classroom and their iPods. They usually do not realize that they picked up the “measles” in Hollywood and Nashville, but that is in fact what happens. Usually, cultural leaders self-consciously define their worldview first, and then purposely translate their worldview into cultural expression. However, most people adopt the cultural forms of the leaders first, and then more or less consciously realize the worldview they have adopted.

The business of analyzing and interpreting culture is not an easy one—it is more difficult than diagnosing a medical condition. From the outset,

I would caution the reader not to oversimplify the process. My purpose in this book is to lay out the basic definitions and guidelines by which we can discern the connections between culture and worldview. This, I trust, will be far more useful to the average Christian than to produce yet another book dissecting worldviews.

For the purposes of this book, culture shall be defined as the life of family and community. Culture is manifest through language, literature, dress, manners, music, motion pictures, architecture, art, and work.

### THE POWER OF CULTURE

It was an unusual phone call taken by the MTV executive office somewhere in the early 1990s. The premier of China was on the line and he wanted to speak to MTV's Chief Executive Officer. "What are you going to do to my country?" he asked.

Forget the military strength of one of the largest nations on planet earth. When it came to changing a nation's social and political systems, there was no better way to do it than by the powerful cultural influences of music and the visual medium.

After all of China's tyrannical forced abortions, infanticides, and sterilizations over three decades to support the one-child policy, China's birth rate finally dropped to 1.58 by 2011. For South Korea however, the process was much more simple. Their access to Western culture enabled a swifter and far less interventionist approach, resulting in a contraction of the birth rate from 6.0 to 1.24 between 1960 and 2011.<sup>1</sup> This poses an interesting question. Does a political state influence the average person as much as do music videos, soap operas, movie stars, and Pop music? It is doubtful. South Korea had ready access to Western education and culture. Although this nation had been more influenced by Christian missionary work than any other Far Eastern nation (and arguably, more than any other nation in the world), the ideas conveyed by Western culture outweighed anything Western missionaries had achieved.<sup>2</sup>

Another example of the powerful impact of secular media on culture reveals itself in the case of recent immigrants to America. Persecuted Christians from Russia and the Slavic countries flocked into America when the iron curtain came down in the early 1990s. I have met with thousands of these Christian refugees over the last decade or so. Many

of these families are amazed at the powerful, toxic nature of American popular culture or teen culture in the lives of their sons and daughters. They had no idea that the American culture would be more dangerous to their families than what they had experienced under the Communists.

Suppose a Christian father was given the choice between exposing his child to atheist teachers for six hours a day for five years, and exposing his child to a Katy Perry-saturated teen culture for six hours a day for five years, I judge he should choose the former. Most kids don't pay attention to their teachers in school anyway. The worldviews of young people are generally dictated more by Pop culture and peers than by their teachers.

I'll never forget the day that the box office released the movie of the second Narnia tale. I took my children to watch *Prince Caspian*. Towards the end of the movie, we were shocked to witness the apparently innocuous, though romantic kiss between Susan and Caspian. The film only netted a PG rating. The romantic interest supplied an unnecessary, gratuitous element to the story. However, that is not what bothered me the most. Any reader of the Narnia tales would know that there is no possibility of a future relationship between Caspian and Susan. As the story ends, Caspian leaves the scene forever, never to pursue the romantic interest again. To the audience, it is clear that Caspian is having a little sexual fun with a girl outside of the marriage covenant.

Exasperating the problem for the *Caspian* scene was the social context into which the romantic interlude was introduced. Before entering the theater, I had read a USA Today report that 95% of Americans getting married confess to having experienced pre-marital sexual relations.<sup>3</sup> How does a once Christianized society descend to these depths? While it is true that premarital fornication has always existed, the incidence hovered around a percent or two until the 20th century (and more specifically—until after the 1950s). Now, premarital sexual activity is practically normative. What used to be considered dysfunctional and socially deconstructive becomes the new normal. Moreover, the last few virgins left are 14, 15, and 16-year-old evangelical children who have yet to experience a romantic relationship without the intention of marriage. Yet these were the children flocking to watch *Prince Caspian*, not to exclude my own children. Hollywood's producers understand that they have yet to capture the 5% of Americans who are steadfastly holding to the old Christian morality, and this is the way to do it. While it is possible

that some producers are not fully aware of the agenda they promote, it is hard to believe that all of them are ignorant of the cultural significance of their cinematic creations.

## POPULAR CULTURE IS POWER CULTURE

Everything changed in the 20th century. The 19th century farmer boy in upstate New York was not rocking out to Elvis Presley and Michael Jackson. For 5900 years, most children were far more influenced by their own parents, or by the Folk culture developed in their local communities, than by a cultural machine centered in a place called Hollywood or Nashville. The farmer boy had never heard of MTV, Lady Gaga, *Star Wars*, *Two and a Half Men*, hook-ups, shack-ups, iPods, and online pornography. If he wanted to find a Proverbs 7 sort of harlot, he would have had to ride his horse for two or three days, and he may have found one in New York City. Today, 80% of young men, 18-25 years old are hooked on online pornography, at a frequency of weekly or monthly visits.<sup>4</sup> Hard as it may be for a young person to imagine today, there was no television, no YouTube, and no Top 40 songs for over 5900 years of world history. Pa played his violin during the long winter evenings as the family gathered around the fireplace. The local community showed up for the barn dance on Saturday night, and that was about it. Cultural patterns developed in a decentralized context. Pastors and parents acted as the cultural leaders in each community with every successive generation.

Popular culture is power culture. These cultural systems enter almost every home in the country by way of hundreds of 50,000-watt transmitters. This now provides for far more energy and reach than one man could ever produce even when speaking very loudly at a public event (such as the Superbowl). Expensive satellites beam signals into every home, whether it be in the most remote village in Ecuador, a farm town in Iowa, or an apartment in downtown Chicago. They all receive the same message, the same standard of “cool,” the same form of music, the same standards of morality (or lack of it), and the same role models in the same dysfunctional movie stars and singers. None of this would have come to pass without the centralization of media control in the cultural capitals of Hollywood and Nashville. The limited accessibility of radio and television station licenses has also contributed to the centralization of media. Newspapers and other media created stars out



of entertainment and sports figures, providing objects of worship for the masses. Actors and musicians appeared larger than life, thanks to camera angles, movie scripts, and the “fame machines” of radio, television, and print media. The people ate it up, and Hollywood and Nashville were happy to provide gruel for their appetite. Thus, Michael Jackson and The Beatles replaced Pa and his fiddle in the homes of South Dakota farm towns.

In the music industry today, the top five recording artists lead the way for the top 40 artists in the nation. These, in turn set the cultural standards for the top 100 artists, who will set the cultural standards for the lesser artists in the genre who provide cultural guidance for the Christian Contemporary artists, as well as a million fourteen-year-old star wannabes in every neighborhood from here to Manhattan, Kansas. The modern cultural milieu turned into a semi-monolithic pyramid capturing billions of people in its web. To question the morality or worldview of it would be to suggest that human nature is something depraved, which is unthinkable for modern man. Most Christians prefer to keep culture in the category *adiophora*—“things indifferent”—and assume it is harmless or of little influence.

## CULTURAL AND SOCIAL REVOLUTIONS

Popular culture would never have achieved such a high degree of influence had it not been for the disappearance of family culture and Folk culture. Without a social revolution, there would have been no cultural revolution. Without age-segregated high schools and the disappearance of the family farm economy, there would have been no Elvis Presley, Michael Jackson, or Katy Perry. As fathers left the family farm, and mothers disappeared from the home, children were drawn into a different social system with its own culture. Popular culture shapes youth culture. It is a culture more highly influenced by Miley Cyrus and Justin Bieber than by Ma and Pa. Media, social media, children’s literature, schools, peer groups, church youth programs, and extra-curricular activities have worked together to produce this new socio-cultural order. The sheer power of this system over a child’s social and cultural development is astounding. With the exception of certain immigrant communities, fragments of the homeschooling movement, and a few family economies, popular culture virtually consumes modern society. Even these exceptional movements have been largely incapable

of overcoming the impact of Pop culture. The cultural war is more powerful and more fundamental than the political battles.

## POPULAR CULTURE TURNS DESTRUCTIVE

What does popular culture do with all of this centralized power? The answer should be obvious. When the top five performing artists in the nation are unequivocal post-modernists like Miley Cyrus, Lady Gaga, Katy Perry, Taylor Swift, Kacey Musgraves, or a band that hammers out an explicit description of a rape in 4.5 minutes, one wonders how quickly these worldviews sink into the consciousness of the masses. This transition seems to be accelerating now, as society morphs from civilized, to decadent, to nihilist. When Kurt Cobain committed suicide in the early 1990s, a nihilist worldview controlled about 25% of the chart toppers. There was only a fifteen year spread between the decadence of Madonna and the celebration of meaninglessness, self-mockery, and sexual nihilism of Lady Gaga. Miley Cyrus moved from nice to naughty to nihilist inside of about four years. There were thirty years between Doris Day's hit song "How Much is That Doggie in the Window?" and Madonna's "Like a Virgin." Ten years later, Katy Perry encouraged fourteen-year-olds to lesbian sexuality. Now Lady Gaga, Britney Spears, Kacey Musgraves, and the entire crew traverse from the span of decadence to nihilism with almost every hit song. In the same breath, they both celebrate and mock sado-masochism, self-adulation, and all forms of sexual decadence.

One would think that a few sane people would be a little concerned about the popular song, "Blurred Lines," which dominated the charts in the latter half of 2013. This hit song spoke in positive (or semi-ambivalent) support of sexual assault, to include explicit pornographic detail. That this foul piece of work should make it to the number one position on music charts in twenty-six major countries around the world is of no small historical significance. We've come a long way from Elvis Presley's "Hound Dog" and Michael Jackson's "Billie Jean." This is what the collapse of a civilization looks like. We must not ignore this outcome. To ignore the destructive power of culture is to be consumed by it. These things should more than catch our attention. They should radically transform the way that Christian families look at popular culture. I have monitored popular cultural offerings since I worked as a disc jockey on various radio formats in the 1980s. The top songs in the nation express

the socially destructive, suicidal impulse more consistently, openly and honestly than ever before. We shudder to think what would follow the outlandish nihilism of Lady Gaga and Miley Cyrus. What more vivid picture of sexual nihilism could be found than Billy Ray Cyrus' daughter swinging nude on a wrecking ball in a recent music video? Where will these stars take the world in the next twenty years? What happens next? Will more than one billion people commit suicide at the same time, when they finally comprehend the full implications of the culture they have embraced?

Cultures reveal the hearts of men, and by nature, men's hearts are "deceitful above all things and desperately wicked" (Jer. 17:9). This does not mean that all culture is hopelessly perverted. After 2000 years of faithful discipleship and implementation of Christ's Great Commission, it is impossible to miss something of Christ's redemptive work permeating human culture around the globe. Yet, the Western world is still in all-out apostasy, and that is a game changer. The leaven of apostasy has spread to every developed nation. This makes modern culture more difficult to interpret, in that there are both apostatizing trajectories and Christian roots intertwined within Western culture.

As I walked through the streets of downtown Melbourne, Australia last year, I was transfixed as I observed the clash of old and new, the constructive and the destructive within the culture. I witnessed neatly dressed school children walking down streets layered in graffiti. There seemed to be multiple strains of culture in conflict. These well groomed school children who attend nice British public schools and Christian schools are listening to Lady Gaga on their iPods. Among the British nations there is still something left that sustains civilization, but there is also that which is destroying it. America has very little heritage left to preserve the culture, perhaps even less than the nations still under the influence of the Queen.

"My Grandfather's Clock" was the most popular song in the nation in 1876, selling over a million copies in sheet music.<sup>5</sup> Today, almost 130 years later, the most popular hits refer to mothers as female dogs and speak freely of raping people. This is called a "cultural shift." It would be difficult to interpret what is happening in a culture if we monitored it for only a year or two. But over ten years, the changes become perceptible, and a hundred years is plenty of time to make the call. The average person

is as unaware of cultural developments, as the frog that sits in the slowly boiling water is hardly aware of his circumstance. If the temperature rises at one degree per year, the frog will not realize his predicament.

### CULTURE IS A RIVER

Certainly, it would be unfair to judge an artist's work by a single paint stroke or even a single painting, as it would be wrong to judge a director by a single movie scene. All art and culture must be seen in historical, social, and cultural context. All culture must be interpreted by its trajectory. Where is culture headed? In order to capture a sense of direction, we will need more than one datapoint. Multiple data points are made available over time, as the true nature of the heart is revealed. Whether it be your teenage son or Katy Perry (who was raised by a Christian pastor and admits to growing tired of singing "Amazing Grace"), the trajectory of the heart is eventually made clear.

Culture flows like a river, with occasional eddies and swirls. Take for example, the Contemporary Christian Music phenomenon of the last forty years. In the late 1960s, Larry Norman and a few other lesser names formed the genre out of the Rock n' Roll revolution of the day. It was a rivulet that spun off of the macro-stream of mass culture. Back in the 1980s, I organized concerts and worked as a disc jockey in the CCM genre on the California central coast. The industry was fraught with scandal. Larry Norman himself went through two divorces and married Randy Stonehill's ex-wife. World Magazine reported Norman having fathered a child with an Australian woman during a 1988 tour.<sup>6</sup> One of the early "mothers" of contemporary Christian music, Marsha Stevens, exited the closet as a lesbian in 1979. The CCM industry is filled with sordid stories of adultery and divorce (including familiar names like Sandi Patty, Amy Grant, John Talbot, and Jaci Velasquez). If the Christian contemporary culture left the mainstream flow of popular culture, it did not differentiate by much. Do Christ's words apply?

*"Ye shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles? Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit." (Matt. 7:16-17)*

The truth value of such words demands our constant consideration and appropriate application to cultural leaders.

Bands like Stryper make it practically impossible to detect any clear distinction between the “Christian” element and the macro-culture. Their latest album released in 2011 called *The Covering* featured songs from Black Sabbath, Scorpion, Iron Maiden, and Judas Priest along with a “Christian” song tacked on entitled “God.” If life is an “illusion,” as Black Sabbath insists in their song “Heaven and Hell”, why do we need mercy, as Stryper testifies in their little appendix to the album? Essentially, Stryper does little to counter the basic metaphysical perspective represented by the Heavy Metal genre, except to offer a weak suggestion that some god or Jesus figure might help us along the way. Stryper is a prime example of thorough Christian synthesis.

The Contemporary Christian Music culture turned mainstream in the 1990s. An Ellison Research study found that the use of CCM doubled in churches between 1998 and 2004, impacting some 74% of Christian churches in America.<sup>7</sup> Those numbers would be higher today. The influence of CCM upon every Christian denomination (almost without exception), is truly remarkable and is not to be ignored in the study of the 21st century Christian church. This makes for an interesting study of culture. Will a marginal departure from the mainstream culture redeem the music genre? Does this movement represent a true shift in worldview, or will this branch merely parallel the main river and continue flowing towards the Niagara Falls with the rest of it? Years from now, we will see the definitive effects of the work of Randy Stonehill, Larry Norman, and Marsha Stevens on the church of Jesus Christ. Did they save Christianity in a secular humanist age, or did they secularize Christianity in an age of apostasy? The jury is still out; time will tell.

If you visit the fifty to one hundred radio stations available on the AM and FM dials in any major market, you will find that over 90% of the selections represent a fairly narrow cultural experience. You may find one Classical or Jazz station, a 40s Big Band station, and a few news talk stations. Other than that, the cultural idiom is popular music in the form of Rock n’ Roll. Even the Country-Folk formats have slowly morphed into the popular form between 1970 and the present day. On one hand, it is not difficult to follow the macro cultural trends. There is however, more going on than the Top 40 offerings. Despite the seemingly monolithic character of the popular culture and worldview represented by media today, there are hundreds, if not thousands, of cultural variants, musical genres, and theological variations in our day. These are the swirls,

eddies, and rivulets that form in the cultural river. Objectively, some are better than others. The “contemporary” Folk style of Michael Card is a far cry from that of Stryper, for example. Nobody would disagree that the family-friendly movie productions from the Kendrick brothers (*Facing the Giants*, *Fireproof*, and *Courageous*) makes for a better offering than *Two and a Half Men*, despite Angus T. Jones’ involvement. In the fall of 2012, actor Angus Jones encouraged a Christian television audience not to watch this “filth.”

“Please stop filling your head with filth. Please. People say it’s just entertainment... Watch out... A lot of people don’t like to think how deceptive the enemy is. He’s been doing this a lot longer than any of us have been around... You cannot be a true, God-fearing person and be on a show like that.”<sup>8</sup>

*Two and a Half Men* may be the raunchiest television program on air, routinely making light of bestiality and sexual orgies (and netting the worst ratings from the Parent’s Television Counsel). Eventually, Jones quit the show despite his influential position and \$8 million per year remuneration.

Serious attempts at cultural reformation are made every day by well-meaning Christian artists and producers, and these efforts ought to be recognized for what they are worth—though it is not easy to judge their long term value. Will Good Newz Tattooz sanctify the somewhat questionable, if not patently pagan, practice of tattooing for the modern church? Will Pat Boone’s Heavy Metal album *No More Mr. Nice Guy* represent a reformation in the genre to the glory of God? Or is it just another frivolous novelty of little consequence? Will Miss USA Runner-Up Carrie Prejean (2009), or Miss America Teresa Scanlan (2011), both professing Christians, lead a cultural shift for women in the direction of Christian modesty, meekness, and piety? (1 Tim. 2:9-10). How will the Miss USA bikini competition on national television help with this? Would a professing Christian’s involvement as an actor in the sitcom *Two and a Half Men* really offer some “salt and light” in a decadent culture? These are the sorts of questions that serious Christians are asking themselves in the first part of the 21st century. If we are pressing for a thoroughly authentic faith from the inside out, then what is the essential value of these cultural offerings? Where lies the heart of the 21st century Christian, and how is it impacting culture?

## BASELINE AND TRAJECTORY

Since culture is the product of human activity that reflects the condition of the human heart, we can interpret the condition of the heart by observing a body of cultural work over a period of time. We must therefore consider both *baseline* and *trajectory*. What is true of an individual life is true of the culture. We all claim a background, for better or worse. Everyone starts somewhere. Whether you are the son of a prostitute from Brooklyn, the son of a tribal chieftain in the Congo, or a daughter of a Christian missionary, you have a heritage. This is your baseline. Communities and entire civilizations always work from baselines. For example, the culture of a public junior high school in a small farm town in South Dakota will be different from the culture of a Japanese junior high school in Kobe, Japan. The Christian civilization in 16th-century England will be different from that which is represented in twenty-first century Chicago. In the Parable of the Talents, Christ describes baseline as the principle investment issued to the three men by the householder. One man received a single talent, another received two talents, and a third received five (Matt. 25:14-30). All of them began with something, and two of them produced return on the investment and one did not.

Cultural trajectory is defined as the direction and force with which an individual, family, or community takes their cultural heritage. Do they improve on what they have received, or not? Is there any advancement in their cultural expressions towards reflecting what is true, right, and beautiful—or not? When missionaries arrived in Hawaii in the 19th century, they removed the sacred significance of the hula dance and taught the women to put on clothing while performing the dance, since both genders had been performing the dance topless. However, following the 1960s Hawaiian culture reversed and the clothes came off. Now, the political and cultural leaders in the state are turning back the clock and reintroducing pagan ideologies and practices as preferable to the Western Christian influence. Much of this is encouraged by the Western apostasy. Hawaiian culture is on a new trajectory now.

If we want to know which Christians survived the Great Apostasy of the twenty-first century, we must watch their trajectories. Baselines are varied, but trajectories will tell the story. When Country music star Carrie Underwood began her career with the hit song, “Jesus Take the

Wheel,” we weren’t sure which Jesus she was talking about. However, after years of hit songs and personal testimonies extolling the virtues of homosexuality, fornication, and feminism, we are left with no doubt as to the heart commitments of Carrie Underwood.<sup>9</sup> Culture is trajectory. The American evangelical world was thrilled with the release of the *Soul Surfer* motion picture in 2011, only to discover that Carrie Underwood played the role of the youth pastor, and the girls in bikinis were less than helpful for the 14-year old boys sitting in the theater.

The trajectory for Western popular culture should not be too difficult to follow. Fifty years after Patty Page issued her hit song, “How Much is That Doggie in the Window?,” the masses aren’t buying her albums anymore. They prefer Eminem’s albums where he refers to his mother as a female dog, and where rape and homosexuality are more accepted themes. At this point in history, the change is rapid. Popular culture did not change at this breakneck pace between 1750 and 1800. During the first Grammy Award Ceremonies in 1959, the Song of the Year award went to Jimmie Driftwood’s “Battle of New Orleans,” and the academy focused more on classical performances. The 2014 Grammys, however, offered a Satanic orgy, in which a lesbian priestess officiated 33 homosexual weddings and Katy Perry served as the witch offering her sacrifices to the “Dark Horse.”<sup>10</sup> Christian apostasy has become an accepted theme, and this was especially pronounced with Grammy Award Winner for Best Country Song, Kacey Musgraves. In her recent release “Follow Your Arrow”, she encourages her listeners to lesbianism and more apostasy from “self-righteous” churches. Her mockery is laced with profanity. Back in 1969, Bobby Bare wasn’t brave enough to offer explicit approval of apostasy in his “Margie’s at the Lincoln Park Inn.” Rather, he described Christian hypocrisy in stark and explicit form, somewhat nonchalantly. Taking a 40-year perspective, the trajectory of the Pop and Country music genres should be obvious.

## THE STANDARD

Naturally, modern relativists will reject my underlying assumption that some cultures are objectively better than others. Romantics like Jean-Jacques Rousseau felt that the pagan cannibals untouched by Western Christianity constituted the ideal culture. But true relativists deny the use of the terms “better than” or “worse than.” They hesitate to criticize any culture whatsoever, with perhaps the one exception of Hitler’s Third



Reich. This does not reflect the Christian worldview, however. There must be a standard for what is true and right, and one either seeks to uphold the standard or reject it. At the end of a man's life, he has either created a body of work that supports a Christian world and life view, or he has detracted from it.

Nonetheless, there is something subjective about my approach, since every artist starts from a different baseline. Take, for example, the young man raised in the slums who tries to morph a Christian music form out of a model developed by inner city gangs. Contrast this with another young man who is a descendent of multiple generations of Christians, and raised on music written by Christians, but decides to write his music based on the musical style developed by inner city gangs. These two young men work off of very different baselines and produce diametrically opposite trajectories. The man with a strong Christian heritage abandons what he has inherited, while the other young man is working with what he knows. When a Christian father weighs in on his daughter's potential suitors, he is faced with something similar. Should his daughter marry the pastor's son who is rebelling against his own father's faith? Or would it be better if she married a genuinely repentant ex-pagan who was raised on the other side of the tracks?

The Halloween festival makes for another interesting example. Technically, the word is of Christian origin, a derivation of "All Hallow's Eve." It had nothing to do with Freddie, Jason, and the Slasher movies. For thousands of years, the world celebrated the Day of the Dead on or around October 31st. The Day of the Dead began after the worldwide flood, when many of the descendants of Noah turned their backs on the true story of God's judgment upon a world that had rejected His laws. So they chose to commemorate the event in a different way. Rather than celebrating God's mercy on their ancestors (Noah and his family), they spent their time lamenting God's judgment on everybody else. Many pagan peoples around the globe kept the Day of the Dead until the Christian age dawned. Then, as Christians sought to remember the faithful men and women who served Jesus Christ under severe persecutions, All Hallow's Eve became the default holiday for a thousand years or so. As time went on, however, the Day of the Dead made a comeback. During the apostasy of the 20th century, almost everyone forgot about All Hallow's Eve, in favor of the Day of the Dead. Recently, some news sources report that there are more Americans celebrating

Halloween (as the Day of the Dead), than those celebrating Easter. A casual observer will come to the same conclusions. I walked through a department store in October of 2013, and found that about a third of the store was dedicated to selling Day of the Dead paraphernalia.

There is an interesting irony here. In the Christian age, believers retained the holiday but changed the name and the meaning of the day. In today's post-Christian era, the Christian name is been retained ("Halloween") but the old significance returns. At this point, my readers should see the tug-of-war going on between Christianity and paganism. Modern civilizations are thrust into a life and death struggle over what direction the culture is to take next.<sup>11</sup>

## THE GOAL

If Christ's mandate was that His followers disciple the nations by teaching them to observe His commandments, then it logically follows that Christians are commissioned to culture change (Matt. 28:18-20). When the Gospel first came to the New Hebrides in the 1880s, Margaret Paton (John Paton's wife) told of the chaos that went on in the early Sunday worship services.<sup>12</sup> Apparently, the natives were bringing their pigs and chickens with them to the service, and they made quite a racket! The natives knew that if they left their animals or any of their valuables at home, they would be robbed. As the missionaries inculcated a Christian system of law and life and orderly government, respect for property was instituted. Only then did the people begin to leave their pigs and chickens at home on Sunday mornings. This is a simple example of a culture change that comes about when the Gospel makes it into the warp and woof of a nation.

To say that the Christian missionary must adapt the message to fit the culture is legitimate as long as he works off of the baseline of any cultural system. However, many Christian ministries see no real need to change the culture by setting new trajectories. Thus, they never quite embrace the clear commission Christ gave to His apostles. All true followers of Christ will set out to change every aspect of human culture, including the language.

Several years ago, I viewed the dramatization of the Jim Elliot story presented in the motion picture *End of the Spear*. It was confusing to me.

Why did the producers choose to use an outspoken homosexual as the lead actor? Why were the missionaries stripping off their clothes as they came into contact with the Auca natives? What other Christian leaders and missionaries over the last 2,000 years would have advocated such contextualization? It is hard to imagine John G. Paton, David Brainerd, or Patrick of Ireland stripping off their clothes for the benefit of the natives, and hiring homosexuals to preach their message for them. In an effort to be relevant, some Christians will surrender everything and abandon the commission. They are content to leave a pagan culture at its baseline. They drive no new trajectories. More fundamentally, they fail to apply the law of God from the outset to such matters as modesty, sexuality, and body mutilation. They also fail to correctly interpret the meaning of native cultural symbols (religious rites, food offered to idols, etc.) Of course, many evangelicals argue that they are willing to do anything to “get people saved.” In the neo-evangelical mind, this means a separation of justification and sanctification. Salvation *is* justification, and does not include sanctification for them. This separation in the modern salvation message has destroyed the Christian Gospel and rendered it powerless to accomplish Christ’s commission.

## LANGUAGE AND BIBLE TRANSLATION

Cultural transformation must impact Bible translations as well, for all native languages are formed around defective worldviews. For example, the word used for “God” in Japanese Bibles is “kami.” The word itself is incapable of conveying the biblical idea of God, because it connotes something else in the Japanese mind. It is a word used for the many spirits of demons, angels, false gods, and humans. When the Bible is translated into a native language for the first time, the translators are bound to the baseline, meaning that they must begin with the limited vocabulary and the limited conceptual reservoir contained in the native language itself. Over time the language must be made to adapt to the Christian worldview. With more teaching on biblical concepts and a robust biblical worldview, and as thousands of men and women are discipled over hundreds of years, new translations of the Bible will emerge that better reflect the true meaning contained in the Hebrew and Greek Bible.

The Hawaiian Pidgin Bible provides a colorful illustration of the limitation of language, using words most of us can understand. The

Pidgin language is obviously constrained by vocabulary, cultural and linguistic connotations, and grammar (or lack of it). What follows is a section of the Pidgin translation from Matthew 13.

“Same day Jesus go outside da house, an sit down near da lake fo teach. Plenny peopo come aroun him, so he go inside one small boat, an sit down dea. Da peopo, dey stay standing on top da beach. He use plenny stories fo teach um. Dis wat he say, “You guys hear da story bout da farma guy? He go plant seed. He throw da seeds fo plant. Some fall down by da side a da trail, an da birds go eat um up. Some fall down on top da rocks wea ony had litto bit dirt. But dey grow up fast, cuz ony litto bit dirt dea.” (Matthew 13:1-4).<sup>13</sup>

The reader may be impressed by the simplicity of the language, in that the vocabulary provides a limited basis for conveying biblical ideas. Whether the problem is rooted in paganism or in a weakened Hawaiian education system is hard to say. Chances are, the early Bibles used in 19th century Hawaii reflected a more accurate translation and gravitas. Over the last century, we have witnessed a deconstruction of language, especially among certain subcultures in English-speaking countries.

Moreover, efforts to disciple the nations living under colonialism (and the African slave trade that fed into America) were probably curtailed at points. The failure to disciple will always produce the failure of Christian culture. Where men fail to disciple other men by faithful daily instruction in the Word of God, there will be no solid Christian men to lead family, church, and culture in subsequent generations. Whether it be South Africa, Hawaii, or the American inner city, one will often find churches emptied of men, with not enough male pastors and elders. Too much Christian work during the last century has been shallow, short term, and ineffective, especially in its attempts to reach men.

If we are serious about discipling entire nations, there must be a willingness to dig in for the long haul. Over several hundred years of careful discipleship and disciplined education in Greek, Hebrew, Latin, English, History, Biblical Theology, Systematic Theology, Hermeneutics, and life application, peoples from any nation would see slow but steady transformation in their families, churches, and cultures. In time, they would develop their own spoken and written languages that would better

serve as a vehicle to carry the Word of God. Thus, the people group that is discipled gains an understanding of God's revelation which then shifts their worldview towards a Christian way of thinking. This shift produces a transformation of language, which in turn produces new translations of the Bible. With better translations of the Bible will come a sharpened conception of a biblical world and life view, and on it goes. This is the cycle by which minds are renewed and transformed according to the will of God (Rom. 12:1-2), and civilizations become Christian.