



Culture



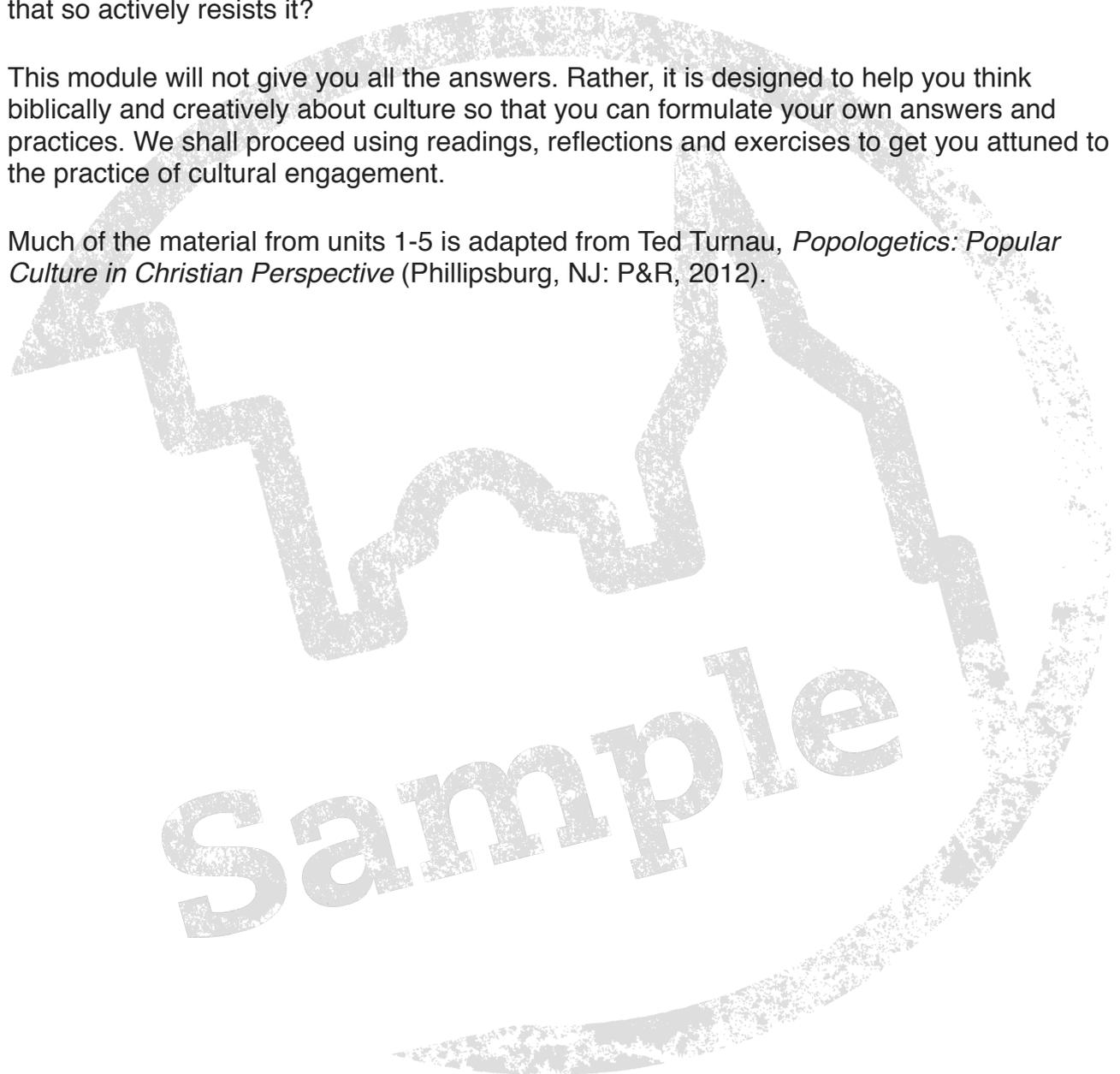
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Introduction

Christians want to change things. We want to see God's *shalom*, his peace and healing, flow in our world. That means engaging culture, including popular culture. How to do that is not an easy question. How do we construct a perspective that engages with the world without becoming conformed to the world? How do we speak truth and grace into a world that so actively resists it?

This module will not give you all the answers. Rather, it is designed to help you think biblically and creatively about culture so that you can formulate your own answers and practices. We shall proceed using readings, reflections and exercises to get you attuned to the practice of cultural engagement.

Much of the material from units 1-5 is adapted from Ted Turnau, *Popologetics: Popular Culture in Christian Perspective* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2012).



Sample

Unit 2: A biblical understanding of culture

Introduction

If we are to engage culture in a God-honouring, fruitful way, we need not only a grasp of central concepts like culture. We need to understand culture *biblically*. The Bible has much to say about culture, and about humans as culture-makers and culture-receivers. We must understand culture through the lens of the Christian world-story. Many Bible scholars summarise the biblical world-story as being about Creation-Fall-Redemption:⁶

1. God created the world, and human beings in his image;
2. Our first parents fell into sin, dragging us and the whole cosmos into ruin, making our default stance towards God one of rebellion; and,
3. God intervened into our helpless situation to save us, principally by sending his Son to die on the cross and be raised from the dead, and starting there, he will restore all things. (By the way, in answering the “reflection” exercise in the last unit, I hope you put something similar). These are the categories through which we must understand all of human culture.

1. What does creation tell us about culture?

First, the Bible tells us that God created the universe, and us. The implications of this simple statement for culture (and for reality!) are huge. Let’s take a look at some of them.

Implication #1: Creation is good, but it can be abused.

Genesis 1 says that God created the world good. This means that the world is good in and of itself (1 Timothy 4:4). Physical existence is not a limitation; it is the way we were made to be (as opposed to some Greek and Buddhist beliefs). The stuff of this world is not a neutral, blank slate. It is good! It is for our delight and it gives God delight.

The doctrine of creation also bears directly on how we think about evil. Nothing in creation is evil in and of itself; that is the point of 1 Timothy 4:4. It becomes evil when it is abused, used in a way that contravenes God’s rules, used in a way that shows no gratitude to God. That is to say, evil emerges in the twisted purposes we force upon a good creation. Evil is not *in* a thing, it is in the way a thing is used (or better, abused, not used according to God’s laws). So sex isn’t evil; the *abuse* of sex (for example, in pursuing sex outside of marriage) is evil. Food isn’t evil; the *abuse* of food (for example, in overeating and gluttony) is evil.

This bears directly on how we understand culture and media. Culture is the development of the creative potential woven into God’s creation. As such, cultural forms are good as

⁶ See for example Cornelius Plantinga Jr., *Engaging God's World: A Christian Vision of Faith, Learning, and Living* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), and Albert M. Wolters, *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985).

well.⁷ Some Christians treat some types of media (say, television, or the internet) as evil. They are not. They have been developed out of God's good creation. The uses that some media can be put to (delivery devices for pornography, or hate speech, or endless exploitative advertising) can be evil. But the evil lies in the ways that cultural forms are produced, distributed and consumed. Saying "Television is evil" is a vast oversimplification. It is part of God's creation, and creation is good. It can be used well or badly, wisely or foolishly, to good ends or evil. But the thing itself is good.

Implication #2: Culture's meaning is bound up with the way creation reveals God.

Reflection

Read Psalm 19:1-4 and Romans 1:18-25. Make a list of the kinds of messages creation might send about God. For example, 'Creation tells me that God exists. Creation tells me that he is good.' And so on. Now try to link this list with specific natural phenomena (a sunset, a forest, rain, and so on). Finally, if culture simply uses creation to create new meanings, then we would expect some of those creation-revelation messages to get through. Think of some of your favourite cultural works. What could you learn about God from them?

In Psalm 19:1-4 and Romans 1:18-25, the Bible talks about how the creation delivers messages about God. It tells us that he exists, created everything, is good and loving, but also that he is angry with our rebellion against him, and that judgement is coming. In other words, creation is God's revelation. And, according to Romans 1:21, we receive these messages loud and clear, "For although they *knew* God..." Everyone has some knowledge of God, shoved down to the basements of our minds, but nonetheless, genuine knowledge of God.

This is immensely important for understanding human culture. Modern and postmodern people typically think of culture as the way humans create meaning for themselves against a backdrop of a dark and meaningless universe. The Bible presents a different picture: creation *is already meaning*.⁸ And when we do culture, we do it in response to that prior meaning, that revelation about God. Culture is our heart-response to God's creation-revelation. When we do culture, we take God's creation-revelation in our hands. We

⁷ Albert M. Wolters in his book *Creation Regained: Biblical Basis for a Reformational Worldview* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985) draws a helpful distinction between "structure" and "direction." Creational structures (what I've called "forms") are rooted in creation, and therefore good. But they can be turned to evil directions. So the technology of television draws upon creational potentials (light waves, electricity, etc.). It is a form rooted in creation. It has its own strengths and weaknesses, but is not evil in and of itself. It can be turned in evil directions (wasteful consumerism, erotic titillation, hate speech, manipulative advertising, etc.). But that does not make television evil. A similar distinction is helpful in other cultural forms as well.

⁸ Christian philosopher Herman Dooyeweerd insisted that creation does not *have* meaning. Rather, creation *is* meaning because it reveals itself to be not self-sufficient. In this way, the in-built structures of creation gesture beyond themselves meaningfully toward its Creator. Meaning is this act of gesturing beyond itself; meaning has an allusive character. See his *New Critique of Theoretical Thought*, vol. 1 (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1953), 96-97.

cannot help but come up against God's revelation in doing culture. In this sense, all culture is implicitly *religious*. It is a response to the voice of God in the stuff he has created.

Implication #3: Being created in God's image means we are inherently relational (and culture is relational).

According to Genesis 1:26-28, we are all made in God's image. Different theologians have interpreted the idea of humans as created in God's image differently. At the most basic, though, the idea of "image" means that we are in some ways like God, and in other ways we are unlike God. Just as a photo of you bears your likeness, but differs from you in some ways (namely, you are not black and white, glossy, 2 dimensional, and 6x4"), so too we are like God in some ways, unlike in others. We are unlike God because we are limited by space, time, dependent on air and food and so forth. But we are like God in some fascinating ways.

One way that we are like God is that we are *relational* beings. God is Trinity. In a sense, he *is* a relationship. Likewise, we are beings who are made for relationship. Theologian Anthony Hoekema says that this relationship has three dimensions: upwards, towards God, horizontal, towards each other, and downwards, towards the earth and the rest of creation.⁹ Let us look at each of these briefly, and how each relates to a biblical understanding of culture.

1. The upwards image: in relationship with God.

We are made for relationship with God. We are made for worship and relationship with God. This is what sets humans apart from animals: our unique capacity for connection with God. We are *homo religiosus*, man the religious. There is no society where there are not at least traces of this very human tendency.

This upward aspect of our image-bearing shapes our cultural activities. In unit one, I said that cultural works are, at their core, religious. This is why: the original intention of culture was worship, a way to respond to God's revelation in his creation, and return back to him praise and gratitude. This means that we must broaden our understanding of worship. It is not only prayer, singing, listening to sermons and partaking of sacraments. Any activity can be worship of God, depending on the intention behind it, and depending on *how* it is done. Adam and Eve's care and development of the Garden of Eden was an act of worship. In a sense, every cultural work is an act of worship to some god or other (we will talk more of this below when we discuss how sin affects culture).

2. The horizontal image: in relationship with others.

Genesis 1:27, the passage that tells us we were created in God's image, says something that many people miss. It specifies that God created his image male and female. That is, we do not fully bear his image as individuals. We bear his image together, as a community. The same point is made even more intensely in Genesis 2:18-25. God said it was not good for the first man to be alone – something was needed to complete him. So he made the first woman to be with him. We were made for relationship not just with God, but with one

⁹ Hoekema, A. A. *Created In God's Image* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986), 75-82.

another. What was true about that first marriage relationship is true of humans generally: together we are the image of God. We were made to love, relate to each other.

This also shapes the way we do culture. Culture draws us together into communities. Culture reflects the inbuilt desire to love and be loved when it reaches out and tries to teach about deep human realities, shared values, forgiveness, family, love, death, and so forth. Sometimes, communities spring up around cultural works. Think of online communities that focus on one particular cultural work, such as the Tolkien-based theonering.net. But in other ways, cultural works, especially popular cultural works, tie communities together by giving us common reference points, common experiences.

A second way the sideways image shapes culture is communication. We are made in the image of a communicating God. God used words and symbols to create this world, according to Genesis 1. Likewise, we use symbols (words, images, music, textures, etc.) to communicate cultural messages through our cultural works. We can use our symbols in wise and loving ways, or in foolish, exploitative or hateful ways. We are called to use our cultural communication in love.

3. The downward image: in relationship with the earth.

In Genesis 1:26-28, immediately after God creates man and woman in his image, he blesses them and commands them to have many children, and to “rule and subdue” the creatures of the earth. Theologians sometimes call this the *cultural mandate*. The command to rule over fish and sea turtles and hummingbirds and cows and all the rest of his creation is actually a command by God to go and start doing culture. In effect, God said to the first humans, “Look, here are all these things I’ve put under your care. Now go and do something with them. Start using them to create a culture. You can start by tending and developing this garden” (see Genesis 2:15). That is what “filling the earth and subduing it” means. It means to tame and shape the unformed earth. God created the earth to be wisely, carefully used to create human culture. It is a call to wise stewardship of the earth we’ve been given.

In Genesis 2:15, God puts Adam and Eve in the garden to “work it and take care of it.” In Hebrew, the verbs there are *‘abad* (“serve”) and *shamar* (“protect”). In other words, we are called not only to use creation, but to serve and protect it as well. In fact, there are hints of a sort of partnership between humans and creation in the peaceable kingdom of Isaiah 11:6-9, and the way creation groans together with us under the weight of the fall in Romans 8:19-22. So the wise cultural development of creation will be, in a sense, conversational. We must always have to have an ear open about how creation is best used in our culture (versus the deaf juggernaut of the contemporary consumer/industrial economy). We are called to steward creation wisely, for it is not ours. It belongs to God, and we are responsible to him for how we use it.

There is another implication of the downward image for culture-making. We image God by creating worlds. J. R. R. Tolkien called it “sub-creation,” and says that it happens anytime someone creates a world of fantasy.¹⁰ But really, it happens more or less whenever anyone creates a work of culture. Recall what I said about cultural works creating “imaginative worlds” in unit one. Just as God engaged with his “context” (the darkness and

¹⁰ Tolkien, J. R. R. “*On Fairy Stories*,” p. 4, California Luther Seminary website, available online at <http://public.callutheran.edu/~brint/Arts/Tolkien.pdf> (accessed 12th April, 2013).

chaos of Genesis 1:2), ordered it, and created a meaningful world for us to inhabit, so too we engage our context (God's creation) and create worlds of meaning for ourselves and others to inhabit. Culture, at its heart, is about imaging God through world-making.

Of course, the upward, sideways, and downward aspects of our image were supposed to work together, in concert. We were originally intended to do culture (downward) in order to glorify God (upward), love our fellow humans (sideways), and care for the other creatures (downward again). We could give a preliminary definition of culture as *the human imaging of God's community, communion, and creativity by engaging and responding to the meanings inherent in God's creation (revelation) in order to create "worlds" of shared meanings that glorify God, demonstrate love to other humans, and demonstrate care for the rest of creation.* This is what the doctrine of creation tells us about our culture-making and culture receiving.

2. What does the fall tell us about culture?

Unfortunately, Genesis 3 tells us that our first parents fell into sin, dragging us into rebellion against God, and the whole creation into ruin and distortion. Often Christians think of sin too lightly. Sin isn't just a cross word here, a lustful glance there. It is rather a deeply rooted heart condition, a compulsion towards rebellion against God.¹¹ This compulsive impulse to rebel against God complicates culture considerably.

First, it distorts all of the relationships inherent in our being made in God's image. Our upward relationship, which was to be guided by true worship, is now misdirected toward idols. Our sideways relationships, which were to be guided by love, become self-serving, and sometimes oppressive and denigrating. Our downward relationship that was to be guided by careful stewardship now becomes exploitative, foolish, and wasteful.

Of course, the cultural expressions of these relationships, our cultural responses to the creation-revelation about God, are likewise distorted. Culture was intended to amplify the praise of creation, to worship, love and craft to the glory of God. Now however, under the influence of sin, all of our cultural efforts are stained, misdirected, twisted from their original intent.

One crucial concept to hold on to when engaging fallen human culture is *idolatry*. All human culture has a religious core, a basic religious motivation. But because of the rebellion woven into human hearts, that religious motivation is bent away from God towards an idol. An idol isn't necessarily a statue before which we prostrate ourselves. An idol is any created thing that takes the place of God in our affections (nation, reputation, career, a romantic other, etc.). Our idol is the thing we live for, what gets us out of bed in the morning, what makes us tick, the thing we place hope in. It is the sun we orbit around. Idolatry is a wilful mistaking of God's gifts for God himself.

Why do we fall for idols? There are two reasons that come to mind: 1. Idols use the goodness of God's creation as bait. The created things that are elevated to the position of functional gods are still good gifts from God. Sex is good. Family is good. Work is good. Romance is good. But they do not work well as gods. They become idols, and if we place

¹¹ See for example theologian Richard Lovelace's definition in *Dynamics of Spiritual Life: An Evangelical Theology of Renewal* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 88.

our trust in them wholly, we move towards our own spiritual destruction. They alienate us from God and cause spiritual disintegration. 2. Romans 1:18-25 gives us a further clue: it is easier dealing with a god that we fashion for ourselves than it is to deal with the true God before whom we stand guilty and without excuse. That misplaced loyalty, misplaced worship, distorts the whole dynamic of human culture.

3. What does redemption tell us about culture?

So far, we have seen the cultural implications of the first two parts of the Christian world-story, creation and the fall. If we stopped the story there, it would be a dark story indeed. We would be left in a completely hopeless position. But God has not abandoned us to a dark, twisted existence. He intervened.

When we typically think of God intervening for us, we think of what theologians call "special grace." God sent Jesus to die for our sins and be raised for our justification. This grace is for God's people only – those who submit themselves to the Lordship of Christ.

But there is another kind of grace that intervenes that is for all people. This is what theologians call "common grace." This is the grace that Jesus talks about in Matthew 5:43-48. We are to love our enemies, just like the Father. After all, Jesus says, the Father sends rain and sunshine on the righteous and unrighteous alike.

The most important passage for understanding common grace, however, must be Acts 14:8-10. Paul and Barnabas come into the city of Lystra, where they heal a man who was lame from birth. Immediately, they are welcomed as gods come to earth, and there is a celebratory sacrifice prepared for them. As soon as they figure out what's going on, they rush into the crowd to stop the sacrifice. Paul tells them that they are only men, like them. He urges them to turn from these "worthless things" (their pagan worship) to the Creator of heaven and earth. In the past, Paul conceded, God let the nations wander in ignorance. And yet, he has not left himself without testimony: He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy (v. 17).

Here, Paul links the ideas of God's common grace (rain, crops, food, things that fill hearts with joy) with *testimony*. In other words, God's gifts to all people are in effect signposts that point to his existence and character, his generosity and kindness.

Reflection

Consider the cultural phenomena of shows like Britain's Got Talent or American Idol, with their Cinderella, rags-to-riches, ordinary guy/girl makes good narratives. What idol or idols are being 'worshipped' here? What good aspect of God's creation is being elevated into a functional god?

The implications for human culture are huge. Given what the Bible says about sin, we should expect that human culture would be a living hell, filled with nothing but darkness, depravity, and idolatry. But that is not the case, is it? We often find beauty, truth, goodness, justice and excellence in human culture. How can we explain that? Are people simply less

sinful than the Bible says? Not at all. What we see is God's common grace, preserving and beautifying culture, allowing humans to be more than they by rights should be, regardless of whether they believe in God or not. God spreads his gifts throughout culture, making cultural goodness and truth possible. That is the burden of Paul's words in Acts 14:17. The things in culture that "fill our hearts with joy" are not just good, happy things. They are gifts from God, and pointers to him. They are like shining shards of light embedded into the darkness of this world, woven into the very fabric of human culture.

Exercise

Find and listen to a recording of the dubstep single by Deadmau5 called 'Raise Your Weapon.' There will be a copy on Youtube. Find the official one by UltraRecords and listen to it on high definition (720p or greater) on decent speakers or headphones (something that can reproduce the bass – that's sort of the point of dubstep). Listen to the form of the music as well as the lyrics. Where do you see common grace shining? Where do you hear truth and beauty (even if dubstep is not your thing)? What does this tell us about God? About humanity? Write your observations down. I'll share my observations at the end of the chapter. But don't look at them until you've completed the exercise.

For our engagement with culture, this means that it is never enough simply to dismiss cultural works as sinful and idolatrous. That would be to drastically oversimplify culture. These grace fragments, God's gifts to us, deserve acknowledgment. They ought to remind us of God's redeeming presence in the world. They ought to move us to gratitude. They are traces that tell us that God has been here, and that he has not given up on this world. Further, these fragments of common grace are a necessary context for the gospel; they point to a world where forgiveness and salvation by grace are possible.

4. Putting it all together, what's the big picture?

When all the parts of the Christian world-story are considered, what is the picture of culture we are left with? A big mess. Understanding culture from a Christian perspective is no easy task: there is real darkness (idolatry, manipulation, exploitation), and real light (the truth and beauty of God's grace shining through). The most God-forsaken piece of popular culture will contain some grace, and the most self-consciously Christian praise chorus will not be free from the taint of sin (the sin nature still haunts our steps and stains our works – see Romans 7:21, Galatians 5:17). Human culture is a messy mixture of good and evil, grace and idolatry, truth and deception, beauty and distortion. In fact, one of the dynamics of a Christian approach to culture is recognising the tension between the grace and idolatry in any given cultural work. In a sense, cultural works are at war with each other, a war over *religious* interpretations of the reality, a worldview battle. In our cultural engagement, we must remain alert for this tension in the imaginative worlds projected by cultural works.

Here then is a revised definition of culture, given the realities of the Fall and God's redemptive purposes in the world:

Culture is the human imaging of God's community, communication, and creativity by engaging and responding to the meanings inherent in God's creation (revelation) to create "worlds" of shared meanings that were intended to glorify God, demonstrate love to other humans, and care for other creatures. In a fallen world, however, these meaningful cultural "worlds" often serve idolatrous and sinful purposes rather than serving God and his purposes for his creatures. Nevertheless, God has not abandoned human culture, and often leaves his stamp on it in the form of common grace that points to the reality of God and the salvation he offers in Christ.

Key points to hold on to

So after considering human culture in light of Creation, Fall and Redemption, here are some points to hold on to:

1. Culture, because it is derived from creation, is **intrinsically good** (though some of the ways it is made and used may not be).
2. Culture is a **human response to God's revelation** embedded in creation.
3. Culture is a way of expressing our being created in God's image. We express that image in three fundamental relationships: upwards (towards God in worship), sideways (towards other humans in love), and downwards (towards the earth, in careful stewardship).
4. Culture in expressing the upward relationship is a **fundamentally religious activity**, a way of glorifying and enjoying God by engaging his creation.
5. Culture in expressing our sideways relationship is a way of expressing our desire to love others through **community and communication**.
6. Culture also expresses our downward relationship and should be done in a way that **cares for the rest of God's creation**.
7. Culture is our way of **imaging God's creativity by creating worlds of meaning** for us to dwell in.
8. Culture becomes **distorted under the influence of our sinful hearts, bent towards the service of idols rather than God**. That twisting of culture's main purpose distorts all of the relationships expressed in culture (upwards, sideways and downwards).
9. Culture still shines with truth, goodness, justice and beauty because of **fragments of grace that point towards God and his salvation**. We need always to be open to culture's common grace elements.
10. Culture is a **messy mixture of light and dark**. Often there will be a tension between elements of grace and idolatry within any given cultural work. Therefore we ought to avoid attitudes and perspectives that oversimplify cultural works.

For further reading and exploration

Anthony Hoekema, *Created in God's Image* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986), chapter 5. *Theologian Hoekema provides a very helpful summary of theological thinking about the image in this chapter. Really, the whole book is excellent in addressing not just the doctrine of the image of God, but also sin and common grace.*

Cornelius Plantinga, Jr. *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Brevari of Sin* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995). *Theologian Plantinga gives a masterful account of the pervasiveness and destructiveness of sin as a "vandalism of shalom."*

Ted Turnau, *Popologetics: Popular Culture in Christian Perspective* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2012), chapter 4. Turnau presents a summary of a Christian theology of culture, and also considers the status of popular culture from a Christian perspective.

Answer Key

Thoughts on Deadmau5's 'Raise Your Weapon.' First, note the form of the music itself. It begins with slow, meditative, open piano chords, and a lone female voice, tender, vulnerable. It slowly builds in intensity through adding layers (electronic drum beat, synthesiser fill chords, etc.) until about halfway through Deadmau5 'drops the bass' and turns it into a full-on dubstep song. This song starts as a gentle lament that builds in volume and intensity as the bitterness of the lyrics hit home.

The lyrics are a lament over how a lover's self-centredness has destroyed the fragile, tender relationship the lovers once had. The central metaphor is that the destruction of the relationship is akin to declaring war. The lover's egocentric, insensitive behaviour has ripped his beloved apart like missiles, like dropping bombs, destroying her.

How does this all reflect common grace? The very fact that the destruction of a relationship is lamented over rather than blithely dismissed itself tells the truth about human relationships: they are fragile, precious, worth preserving, worth mourning over. When our relationships die, it is as if part of us dies with it. Further, what destroys relationships? Stubborn ego, self-centredness, insensitivity. In a word, sin. And the sin that destroys human relationships points ultimately to the way sin destroyed our relationship with God. Through our self-centredness, we declared war on Someone who loved us, loves us still. It is an evil and terrible thing, to watch destroy a relationship (whether between humans, or between humans and the divine).

In fact, often dubstep songs drop the bass as just a way to kick up the intensity, to get people to dance, etc. In this case, dropping the bass seems to fit with the overall story of the song. As the bombs fall and the relationship burns, this throbbing, pulsating bass line explodes as if to symbolise the malevolent force that has ripped the relationship apart, the desolate emptiness where once there was love.

As a whole, it works quite well. And it works precisely because we understand the pain involved, the completeness of the loss. The song emphasises the gravity of the loss, and so therefore the preciousness of human relationships, and the demonic weight of the sin that destroys relationships. In this way, by revealing painful truth about what destroys human relationships, something as unlikely as a dubstep single can show something of God's grace and truth.