

ENGAGING CULTURE

Disciplines and Standards



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The Fellowship of Ailbe

A ReVision Resource from The Fellowship of Ailbe

Engaging Culture
A *ReVision* Resource from The Fellowship of Ailbe
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Welcome to *Engaging Culture*

Welcome to *Engaging Culture: Disciplines and Standards*, a brief study which provides guidelines for Christians for engaging the culture they are involved with every day. *Engaging Culture: Disciplines and Standards* is one of our *ReVision* Resources from The Fellowship of Ailbe.

These studies are designed for individual or group use. While you may derive much benefit from studying on your own, that benefit can be greatly enhanced by joining with a friend or a group to read, discuss, share, challenge, and pray for one another.

Take one lesson at a time, reading the Scriptures and narrative aloud, and pausing to reflect on and discuss the questions provided. Don't be in a hurry. Be willing to take more than one session on a lesson if it will allow you to delve more deeply into the subject matter.

If you're in a group, make sure you prepare for each study by reading through the lesson in advance and answering the questions in writing. Take turns leading your group. Let every member share in the privilege and responsibility of facilitating discussions. Group leaders should not feel like they have to "have all the answers." Their task is simply to lead the group through the readings and questions, and to help everyone participate.

These studies are designed as brief introductions to the subject under consideration. We hope they will enlarge your worldview, help you to become more firmly rooted in Scripture, equip you to minister to others, and stimulate you to want to learn more about the Word of God and the Biblical worldview.

We are happy to receive your suggestions for future topics and studies. Contact us at our webpage. And if you're not receiving *ViewPoint* first thing every day, then be sure to register on the website, www.ailbe.org.

T. M. Moore
Principal

1 Repudiate

Then Jesus went into the temple of God and drove out all those who bought and sold in the temple, and overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves. And He said to them, "It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer,' but you have made it a 'den of thieves.'" Matthew 21.12, 13

A lesson about culture

The story of Jesus driving the money-changers out of the temple has an air of comic relief to it.

Can't you just see those men, ducking the blows from Jesus' whip as they grab for money and merchandise, while the crowd looks on, shocked, but probably amused?

Jesus had come to the very heart of Jewish life and culture – the temple. There He expected to take up the purposes of God, to seek Him in prayer and to make Him known through teaching. Instead, He encountered this unlawful trafficking in goods and services, within the temple precincts, and it made Him furious.

In this episode Jesus provides an important lesson for us, His followers, in thinking about how we should engage the culture around us each day. Culture consists of artifacts, institutions, and conventions, and includes everything from language, to fashion and entertainment, tools and technologies, public policies and the laws of the land. Culture is what human beings make in order to define, sustain, and enrich their lives. Culture can be very good; God Himself has given us the gifts and resources for making culture. But He expects us to use culture in ways that will honor Him and benefit our fellow human beings.

The money-changers in the temple were neither honoring God nor benefiting their neighbors. They were taking advantage of people, disregarding God's purpose for His temple in order to make a profit on those who had come from far away to make an offering to the Lord. Jesus observed that this practice, this bit of local culture, if you will, was contrary to God's purpose, and, in dramatic fashion, He made known His displeasure in a most public way.

When culture is bad

From this we learn that sometimes proper Christian engagement with culture involves *repudiating* culture that honors neither God nor men.

Jesus didn't just *avoid* the money-changers' booths. He *overturned* them, taking the risk that He might incur the wrath of the powers-that-be. But everyone seems to have understood that this practice was rather sordid, and no one moved to make Jesus pay for His action. Sometimes culture is so bad, so dishonoring to God and hurtful to our neighbors, that believers need to repudiate the use of it, and that over and over again, if necessary (we recall that Jesus cleansed the temple twice, cf. Jn. 2).

Christians should repudiate all forms of culture which deliberately violate the Law of God or which take advantage of neighbors or encourage them to break God's Law.

Here a wide range of cultural artifacts and practices come to mind. Christians should absolutely repudiate such obvious evils as abortion, pornography, drug dealing and abuse, political corruption, practices or laws that allow the exploitation of workers, women, immigrants, or the poor, and more.

But other, less obviously wicked practices should also be rejected and condemned by Christians, such as incivility, gossiping, slip-shoddy work practices, taking advantage of others, reckless driving, bullying, and many more. It's not enough that believers merely avoid such practices; we must be prepared to speak out against and repudiate them publicly.

A public effort

Repudiating corrupt or unlawful forms of culture involves more than simply not making use of them. We must be prepared to argue publicly against such practices, to pursue lawful actions to curtail or forbid them – and to rebuke or punish those who pursue them – and to make very sure that no such cultural forms or practices are tolerated in our own lives or communities.

Culture in all its forms can have powerful effects on how we think and live. In our day, many forms of culture can only be described as ungodly, including our uncivil use of language and the loss of mutual respect in the public square.

As we see from the example of our Lord Jesus, it is part of the Christian's culture-making calling to expose and expunge as many such practices and forms as are within our reach.

For reflection or discussion

1. "Christians should repudiate all forms of culture which deliberately violate the Law of God or which take advantage of neighbors or encourage them to break God's Law." Do you agree with this? What would this require on your part?
2. What are the consequences when Christians refuse to repudiate culture that does not honor God and hurts others?
3. Can you think of any cultural forms or practices in your community which are working to the detriment of the community? Do churches have a responsibility to address these?
4. What are some of the risks involved in working to repudiate ungodly cultural forms and practices? How can believers help one another in facing these risks?
5. What are your goals for this study? What do you hope to learn?

Next steps: Talk with some Christian friends. What would be some examples of ungodly cultural forms or practices in your community that believers should unite to repudiate? How might they begin to do that?

For prayer:

2 Appropriate

“And Moses was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and was mighty in words and deeds.” Acts 7.22

A gift of common grace

We make a mistake as Christians if we hold the view that all non-Christian culture is worthless and should be avoided. This is simply not the case.

God has given gifts for making culture to every human being, and very often those who do not know Him are capable of making artifacts, establishing institutions, or promoting conventions that actually are very useful for human flourishing.

This is a measure of God’s [common grace](#) to all people. Believers must not despise such gifts, and we must not ignore or avoid them.

In his sermon to the religious leaders of the day, Stephen made the point that Moses had been schooled in the culture, language, and lore of the Egyptians. He understood court protocol, what was appropriate and what was not in approaching the Pharaoh. He was well aware of the role that magicians and priests played as advisors to Pharaoh. One would have to reckon with these lackeys if he wanted to persuade the king of some particular course of action.

I do not suggest that Moses enrolled in Pharaoh’s court school with the idea of gaining as much as he could for later service to God. Certainly his parents may have had such an idea in mind. Moses was brought up in Pharaoh’s court, so he could hardly avoid whatever was taught or practiced there.

Daniel and his three friends might have envisioned themselves as being in a better position to serve God and His people if they took up the challenge of learning the ways of the Babylonian court. Paul must have studied Greek philosophy and Roman law in order to serve the community of God’s people more effectively. He could not have understood, as he pored over those books and studies, how the Lord Jesus would employ his secular learning for Kingdom purposes.

God’s gifts – to us!

The point is that all good cultural forms and practices, coming as they do from the hand of God, are available for the people of God to use in furthering His Kingdom and glory.

We do not *repudiate* those unbelieving aspects of culture which are good and useful. Rather, we *appropriate* all such forms, learning as much as we can about them and considering ways they might be put to use for the glory of God.

Appropriating the good products of unbelieving culture is the second way that Christians engage the culture around them. What does this involve?

First, we have to be able to *recognize* good culture when we see it. We’ll talk more about this in the last two segments of this series. For now, as Paul counsels, whatever artifacts, institutions, or conventions of our contemporary culture give evidence of being true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, commendable, excellent, or worthy of sincere praise, we should consider such cultural forms and practices and recognize the value they hold for bringing God’s goodness to others. All such cultural forms and practices fall within the universe of culture which Christians may engage with a view to appropriating them for the Kingdom of God (Phil. 4.8).

Mastering good culture

We must learn as much as we can about such forms, so that we are able to master their use with the best of our unbelieving contemporaries. We cannot make the most of these viable forms unless we strive for excellence in our own use of them, whether in our work or simply as a matter of personal improvement.

Christians did not invent writing, for example, or the forms of poetry and literature. Nor did we invent computers, the Internet, or organized sports. It is clear, however, that such conventions and forms are available to us for the work of the Kingdom. But if we do not take the time to learn these cultural forms and practices, and to master their use, whatever we do with them in the Kingdom will be less than honoring to God and beneficial to others.

There is much good to be found in the culture of our unbelieving age. Christians engage that culture wisely and well when we do so in order to appropriate good cultural forms and practices for the work of the Kingdom of God.

For reflection or discussion

1. “For now, as Paul counsels, whatever artifacts, institutions, or conventions of our contemporary culture give evidence of being true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, commendable, excellent, or worthy of sincere praise...all such cultural forms and practices fall within the universe of culture which Christians may engage with a view to appropriating for the Kingdom of God (Phil. 4.8).” Give some examples of this kind of “good” culture from the unbelieving world:
2. What would you say are the basic steps to take in mastering any form of culture? Why should Christians want to do this?
3. What are some cultural forms or practice you engage each week that have the potential to benefit others? Are you as skilled and consistent in the use of these as you might be? Can you think of some ways you might improve your use of these resources?
4. What cultural interests do you have that clearly have their origin in the unbelieving world – such as, film, literature, politics, and the like? Suggest some ways these forms might be “take captive” and put to work in advancing the Kingdom of God (2 Cor. 10.3-5):
5. What are the most important things to keep in mind when we are appropriating unbelieving cultural forms and practices for the Kingdom and glory of God (cf. 1 Cor. 10.31-11.1)?

Next steps: What are some forms of unbelieving culture that you make use of every day? Would you describe yourself as seeking to appropriate those forms for the Kingdom of God? Talk with some Christian friends about this. How can you help one another learn and make use of the culture of the unbelieving world in ways that honor God and bless your neighbors?

For prayer:

3 Redirect

Now the multitude of those who believed were of one heart and one soul; neither did anyone say that any of the things he possessed was his own, but they had all things in common. Acts 4.32

The greatest challenge

Citizenship in the Kingdom of God changes everything in a person's life, including the ways we engage culture.

We've seen thus far that Christians will want to *repudiate* certain cultural forms or practices because they neither honor God nor bless human beings. But that doesn't mean that all culture beyond the pale of the Kingdom is to be avoided. Some aspects of culture in the unbelieving world are quite good, and can be *appropriated* by the followers of Christ to help us in our work of seeking and advancing the Kingdom of God.

Perhaps the most challenging aspect of engaging culture from within the Kingdom of Jesus Christ is our calling to *redirect* culture away from ourselves to the needs of others and the glory of God.

Typically we think of culture as those artifacts, institutions, and conventions that we create or use in order to define, sustain, and enrich our lives. And culture certainly is that.

Yet in the Kingdom of God the creation and use of culture must not be undertaken for mere self-interest. The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it – including all culture, and all the culture that makes up our individual lives (Ps. 24.1). In the Kingdom of God we understand that a new economy has arrived on the human scene. That economy calls for self-denial and sacrifice in the service of others, and this includes all the culture of our lives.

The first Christians

The first Christians understood this implicitly.

They immediately saw that the various forms of culture in their possession were not to be grasped. Instead, they gave up their goods as situations arose in order to meet the needs of the community as a whole.

The believers in Jerusalem began sharing possessions, giving up money, opening their homes for prayer and fellowship, selling excess property to care for the needs of the poor, and making gifts of clothing for others. The cultural resources at their disposal, which they had previously used only for themselves and those closest to them, became powerful tools for expressing the love of God among the members of the Body of Christ and the surrounding community.

All good gifts of culture, whether made or appropriated, are not to be kept as private possessions, to be indulged only by those who "own" them. The earth is the Lord's, and when the Lord's people have needs, the Lord calls His people to *redirect* their cultural resources to help meet the needs of others.

Two examples

This redirecting of culture is most readily observable in two ways.

First, giving: The first Christians were generous to a fault. They gave money to support the poor, care for widows, provide for ministers, relieve the victims of famine, and further the work of missions. They gave readily and abundantly in a society where monetary resources were, in the main, scarce, and where people were accustomed to pinching every penny and consuming all their income on themselves. Christians gave

liberally and joyfully, thus making available a wealth of tangible evidence that a new reality – the Kingdom of God – had broken into history.

Second, by the practice of hospitality Christians demonstrated that, in the Body of Christ, believers were all family members with one Father and one King. Christians offered their homes as meeting places for churches, temporary shelters for those in need of housing, and venues within which to strengthen the bonds of fellowship with other members. They shared meals together, worshiped together, and, doubtless, laughed and played together in one another's homes.

Money and homes were only the most prominent ways that Christians redirected their cultural possessions for advancing the Kingdom of Jesus Christ. We are not our own; we have been bought with a price. And all that we have belongs to Him Who bought us, and Who calls us to show His love by every means to the watching world, including the culture He has entrusted to us.

For reflection or discussion

1. "All good gifts of culture, whether made or appropriated, are not to be kept as private possessions, to be indulged only by those who "own" them. The earth is the Lord's, and when the Lord's people have needs, the Lord calls His people to redirect their cultural resources to help meet the needs of others." Does this principle still apply today? Discuss some ways this should be practiced in the Christian community:
2. What are the greatest obstacles we have to overcome in "redirecting" culture away from ourselves to the needs of others?
3. Why does redirecting our cultural resources in this way present such a powerful witness to the Lord Jesus?
4. What are the biggest obstacles keeping Christians today from being more effective, consistent, and generous in redirecting their cultural forms and practices? Suggest some ways to overcome these obstacles in your own life.
5. Do local churches together have any responsibility for the material needs of people in the larger community? Why or why not? How might churches work together to redirect some of their cultural resources to meet needs in the larger community?

Next steps: What are some ways that a local church serves to redirect the gifts of culture to meet the needs of others? Ask one of your church's deacons to explain.

For prayer:

4 Transform

Do not let your adorning be merely outward – arranging the hair, wearing gold, or putting on fine apparel – rather let it be the hidden person of the heart, with the imperishable beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is very precious in the sight of God. 1 Peter 3.3, 4

A work in progress...

What matters most of all in the way Christians engage culture is making sure that we are doing so as God Himself would – glorifying and honoring Him in all things (1 Cor. 10.31).

Culture is a gift from God intended to bring honor to Him and benefit to human beings. Christians *repudiate* all forms of culture that fail these tests. They *appropriate* as much as they can from the culture around them, embracing God's good gifts from whatever source they may be available. And they *redirect* their use of culture to serve others by giving freely of what God entrusts to them, sharing all their cultural possessions as needs arise which they can meet.

But the Christian engagement with culture goes beyond even this. Christians themselves are a work in progress. Under the teaching and shaping of the Holy Spirit, we are being increasingly transformed into the image of Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 3.12-18). All our thoughts, affections, values, priorities, words, and deeds are a work zone of God's Spirit, Who is at work within us to make us willing and able to do what is pleasing to God (Phil 2.13), and that exceeding abundantly above all that we could ever dare to ask or think (Eph. 3.20).

...and our culture, too

It makes sense to think, therefore, that, as *we* are being transformed for better citizenship in the Kingdom of God, so too the culture we engage would be *transformed* as well, from something that merely satisfies our human needs to something that glorifies God and benefits others.

Peter charged the women believers of Asia Minor to pioneer in this by transforming the way the world thinks about beauty. In Peter's day, as in ours, feminine beauty was regarded as a physical thing, something to be observed and admired. And, as in our day, women in the Roman Empire of the first century had perfected a number of ways of enhancing their physical beauty in order to make a more pleasing, and perhaps more enticing, presence in the world. The ladies of Peter's day braided their hair, put on makeup, strapped on baubles and bangles and bright shiny beads, robed themselves appealingly, and dabbed on that world's equivalent of Chanel No 5.

A challenge to the ladies

But Peter challenged the women of his day to take hold of the very idea of "beauty" – a very culturally specific notion, as Umberto Eco has shown (*A History of Beauty*) – and make it something altogether different from what anyone had imagined before.

He called on the women of the churches in Asia Minor to cultivate an inward, spiritual beauty that would show itself to the world in gentleness, kindness, softness, and unfailing patience and love.

Anyone who has known such a woman – and some of us have – will readily agree that, though this woman may be outwardly beautiful to look upon, her inner beauty is by far the stronger of the two.

Over the years Christians have transformed culture in more ways than we might imagine. In music, the arts, education, science, the workplace, civil government, and technology, Christians have appropriated existing cultural forms, or invented new ones, and, in the process of redirecting them to Kingdom uses, have transformed them altogether.

This is a challenge which goes out to every believer, every day. In our conversation, our approach to work, the ways we treat others – forms of culture, all – we must work to transform what people experience in such a way as to show the world the hope we have in Jesus Christ and the power which is ours in His Kingdom of light and truth (1 Pet. 3.15).

Christians take up the challenge of transforming their culture every day. As we learn more about the character of the Kingdom of God – a Kingdom of righteousness, above all – that cannot help but transform our own lives, and transform as well every aspect of our engagement with culture.

For reflection or discussion

1. “But Peter challenged the women of his day to take hold of the very idea of “beauty” – a very culturally specific notion, as Umberto Eco has shown (*A History of Beauty*) – and to make it something altogether different from what anyone had imagined before. He called on the women of the churches in Asia Minor to cultivate an inward, spiritual beauty that would show itself to the world in gentleness, kindness, softness, and unfailing patience and love. Anyone who has known such a woman – and some of us have – will readily agree that, though this woman may be outwardly beautiful to look upon, her inner beauty is by far the stronger of the two.” Can you identify any principles here to guide you in thinking about transforming the culture you use each day?
2. Meditate on Romans 12.1, 2. Do you think today’s Christians are *transforming* culture or *conforming* to it? Explain:
3. Think of your work, whatever it may be. What kinds of cultural forms – artifacts, institutions, or conventions – do you engage every day in your work? Are any of these candidates for being transformed for Kingdom purposes?
4. Meditate on Genesis 4.19-24. The children of Cain invented music and poetry. But David and other psalmists transformed those cultural forms. In what ways?
5. The Romans used a cross to terrorize people and keep them in line. But Jesus transformed the meaning of the cross. How?

Next steps: How has your use of culture changed since you became a Christian? Talk with some of your Christian friends. In what ways can you help one another become even more aggressive at transforming the culture of your lives?

For prayer:

5 Innovate

And He took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them saying, "This is My body, which is given for you; do this in remembrance of Me." Luke 22.19

Cultural innovators

From the beginning of the Christian movement, the followers of Jesus Christ have blazed new trails in creating culture. They have been used to *innovate* a great many new cultural forms that have brought glory to God and benefit to others to this day.

Jesus Himself showed the way in this by innovating two new forms of culture for use by His people in worship – baptism and the Lord's Supper. These two venerable forms dramatize so many powerful truths of the Christian faith that it is all but unthinkable for a body of believers to gather without regularly making use of them.

Christians over the centuries have innovated other forms of culture as well. They promoted the expansion of literacy and education; changed the face of civil law; enlarged the possibilities of music; created new literary forms, such as the sonnet; improved working conditions by creating the craft guild; invented new types of architecture; standardized vernacular tongues through the translation of Scripture; and birthed the scientific revolution and all the basic practices which still define the terms of that now-secular enterprise.

Christians even changed the way letters are written. A typical letter during the waning years of the Roman Empire would begin with a greeting that said something like, "Greetings and good health." Then on to the body of the letter.

Compare that with Paul's, "Grace to you, and peace, from God the Father and Jesus Christ our Lord!"

Christians worked to create freedom for slaves and to free waste lands for cultivation and development by draining swamps and improving tools for cultivating the soil.

Christians invented movable type printing, the popular book, and mass pop culture – in the form of prints, etchings, banners, songs and hymns, and inexpensive broadside books.

Christians created the university and public education. The list goes on. Because culture in all its forms provides opportunity for glorifying God and blessing others, it's not surprising that Christians have employed their minds and talents to *innovate* a wide variety of cultural forms and improvements.

Called to innovate

We don't all have to be geniuses in order to innovate in the way we use culture.

For example, what if we were to *repudiate*, once and for all, all gossip and all carping and complaining, and instead were to work hard day by day to *redirect* our tongues toward building others up (Eph. 4.29)? We would have to *innovate* some new ways of engaging people in conversation, by getting to know people and taking a real interest in them, becoming better listeners, making sure all our words were seasoned with grace, and speaking truth in love at all times.

If every believer just worked a bit harder to innovate new forms of conversation, I'm persuaded the world would certainly notice the difference!

Or what if believers decided, let's say, just to be a bit provocative, to *innovate* our approach to Sundays. Suppose we decided we were going to honor the Lord's Day and not indulge our favorite cultural pastimes, diversions, or interests, but instead give ourselves, in various ways through the day, to meditating on God, reflecting on the wonders of His creation, rejoicing in His redemption, enjoying the fellowship of His saints, and ignoring the goings-on of the world?

Actually, that wouldn't so much be *innovating* the Lord's Day as *rediscovering* its proper use – a use which we have *innovated* amiss in order to accommodate the weaknesses of our flesh.

Sending a signal

Innovations like this would send a sure signal to the world that we are a different people, who serve a different King, and live according to a different economy and different values. And that, after all, is what living the Kingdom life is all about.

For reflection or discussion

1. “We don't all have to be geniuses in order to innovate in the way we use culture. For example, what if we were to *repudiate*, once and for all, all gossip and all carping and complaining, and instead were to work hard day by day to *redirect* our tongues toward building others up (Eph. 4:29)?” Discuss what might be involved for Christians to innovate some new conversational practices in their lives, both in the world and in the church:
2. Can you think of any other areas of cultural engagement where you might be able to innovate new forms or expressions of culture, for the glory of God and the benefit of your neighbors?
3. What about churches? Should churches be involved in encouraging cultural innovation, say, in education or the arts or job placement? Why or why not?
4. Not all cultural innovation is good. How can we know which is and which isn't? For example, is it a good thing for a nation to invest in creating renewable energy sources? Should Christians support such cultural innovation?
5. Is it possible to innovate cultural forms – such as worship, disciple-making, and the like – *away* from the Lord's standards? How would we be able to tell when this was happening?

Next steps: How does your church work to equip members for their cultural lives? Talk with some church leaders about this question.

For prayer:

6 Three “Legs”

For I want you to know what a great conflict I have for you and those in Laodicea and for as many as have not seen my face in the flesh, that their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love, and attaining to all the riches of the full assurance of understanding and the mystery of God, both of the Father and of Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. Colossians 2.1-3

Five disciplines

We have considered five specific ways in which Christians are called to engage culture in their service to God and their neighbors.

Some culture they must *repudiate* as being of no value and offensive to God. Yet there are many good forms of culture, even within the culture of the unbelieving world, that Christians may *appropriate* for their service in God’s Kingdom. All their existing culture, as well as whatever they may appropriate, Christians are to *redirect* toward the needs and concerns of others. In the process, they will engage in *transforming* some cultural forms and *innovating* others, especially at the very basic and humble levels of everyday life.

All this cultural engagement suggests *standards*, ways of thinking about, making, using, and judging culture in order to make sure that we engage culture in ways that are pleasing to God and beneficial to others.

Most of us are not going to become professional culture critics. Nevertheless, we must all assume some posture of judgment toward culture so that we are able to “judge righteous judgment” as our Lord Jesus commands (Jn. 7.24). But even though our base for judging culture be not an accredited lectern or an authoritative throne, but only, shall we say, a humble stool, we still need standards to help us.

Standards suggest knowledge and wisdom, all the treasures of which are stored up in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Beauty, goodness, and truth

In His Word the Lord indicates *three primary standards* which can serve as sure legs for the humble stool on which we sit to judge the culture we must engage each day.

These three – beauty, goodness, and truth – are braced, as it were, by three additional guides for judging culture – the Scriptures, the heritage of Christian culture, and the work of God’s Spirit today. We will consider the three “legs” of our judgment seat in this installment, and finish our study by examining the “braces” which hold together our “judgment stool” for taking our seat to engage culture.

Beauty, goodness, and truth, contrary to what many suppose, are not criteria invented by Plato for discovering the good and reliable forms of the world. Scripture teaches these from the very beginning, and Scripture antedates the Greek philosophers by many centuries.

Beauty, goodness, and truth are nothing other than expressions of the character of God into time and creation, supremely, in our Lord Jesus Christ. Christian artists – such as Albrecht Dürer and Gerard Manley Hopkins – looked to the creation, as well as to Jesus, to discover the patterns of beauty which would define their own art. Centuries of Christians have taken their understanding of goodness from the teaching of God’s Law and the example of Jesus Christ. And the Scriptures as a whole, which teach us primarily about Jesus (Jn. 5.39), have served as a sounding-board and filter for truth claims in every age.

Grow in the Lord

If we would have strong legs for our humble judgment stool, from which to discern and engage the culture of our lives, we can do no better than to improve our understanding of beauty, goodness, and truth. Study the

Scriptures. Meditate on the life and work of Jesus Christ. Discover the many patterns of beauty at work in the books of Scripture and the creation. Look to the long heritage of Christian culture to see how our forebears in the faith thought about and pursued these cultural standards. Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ (2 Pet. 3.18).

The more we improve our understanding of beauty, goodness, and truth – the three foundational cultural standards – the more reliable will be our efforts at judging and engaging culture in ways that please God and bless our neighbors.

For reflection or discussion

1. “Beauty, goodness, and truth are nothing other than expressions of the character of God into time and creation, supremely, in our Lord Jesus Christ. Christian artists – such as Albrecht Dürer and Gerard Manley Hopkins – looked to the creation, as well as to Jesus, to discover the patterns of beauty which would define their own art. Centuries of Christians have taken their understanding of goodness from the teaching of God’s Law and the example of Jesus Christ.” What can we learn about beauty, goodness, and truth from looking at Jesus?
2. What can we learn about these from observing the creation?
3. Would you like to gain more exposure to our Christian cultural heritage? How might a person do that?
4. Beauty, goodness, and truth are not *subjective* standards; they exist *objectively* because they exist in Christ. Yet everyone, even non-Christians, have *some* idea of beauty, goodness, and truth. Why do you suppose this is so? How can we use this “common ground” to work for better culture in our communities?
5. Do you think churches should do more to equip their people for engaging culture? Why or why not?

Next steps: Get with some friends to talk about beauty, goodness, and truth. Make some lists of things beautiful, good, and true. How can such “models” serve to improve your overall ability to judge and engage culture?

For prayer:

7 Three “Braces”

For I want you to know what a great conflict I have for you and those in Laodicea and for as many as have not seen my face in the flesh, that their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love, and attaining to all the riches of the full assurance of understanding and the mystery of God, both of the Father and of Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. Colossians 2.1-3

A humble platform

We are considering the platform from which we must judge and engage the culture of our lives in ways that please God and bless our neighbor.

And we must judge and engage culture, so we need a reliable platform on which to operate.

We do not all aspire to be professional or academic critics of culture. We seek not a university lectern or an academic’s throne on which to sit in judgment on the culture around us. We will be satisfied with a humble stool of three legs – beauty, goodness, and truth. We will make it our goal to improve our understanding of these ideas, especially as they all come to focus in the Person of our Lord Jesus Christ. He is all beauty, goodness, and truth personified. The better we learn Him, as He reveals Himself in Scripture and His providential work of creation, the sounder will be our judgment concerning culture matters, and the more effective our engagement of culture will be for the glory of God and the blessing of others.

Scripture, tradition, the Spirit

Three “braces” join the “legs” of our humble stool, to guide us in making the most of these primary criteria for judging culture. These are Scripture, the heritage of Christian culture, and the work of God’s Spirit in the world today.

We have perhaps already said enough about Scripture. We do believe that studying God’s Word can greatly clarify our understanding of culture and cultural concepts and standards, especially if we can bring all our studies around to shed light on the picture of Jesus presented throughout the Bible.

Of the vast heritage of Christian culture, alas, the great majority of Christians remain largely ignorant. We may perhaps be familiar with a few of the names – Dante, Bach, Milton, Hopkins, Wilberforce, Kuyper, King, and so forth – and at least a few of the many good works of culture such people produced.

But, in the main, the heritage of Christian culture is *terra incognita* for most Christians, and that in spite of the fact that a substantial trove of that heritage is available to us yet today in books, artifacts, and venues which are, with the Internet, accessible to practically every believer.

We can learn much about beauty, goodness, truth, and our Lord Jesus Christ as the embodiment of these, by reading the works, studying the art and literature, and listening to the music of our Christian forebears. If we’re serious about engaging culture from a consistently Christian posture, we will make the time for such study.

Instead, most believers today seem to despise our cultural heritage. Consider the easy way we have, for the most part, tossed the heritage of Christian hymnody and liturgy into the trash can of history. Who reads *The Divine Comedy* anymore? Or discusses a Bach cantata or Hopkins’ remarkable “sprung rhythms” with his children?

There is much, much of beauty, goodness, and truth to be learned here, and we do well to make the study of Christianity’s cultural heritage part of our own spiritual disciplines.

The Spirit at work today

Even today the Spirit of God is at work, showing us new insights to beauty, goodness, and truth through the work of Christian artists, poets, song writers, preachers, businessmen, philosophers, and more.

The books and journals are there; the websites beckon. God's Spirit is working to give us reliable examples of culture in many fields, which can help us in improving our own ability to judge and engage the culture of our everyday lives. But we need to apply ourselves to the task of understanding how God's Spirit is working in His people for cultural renewal today, or we'll miss an important "brace" in our approach to engaging culture

We can learn to appreciate beauty, treasure goodness, and stand for truth if we will study Scripture, appreciate our Christian heritage, and learn from those in whom the Spirit of God is working today. The dying culture of our day is crying out for renewal, and Christians through the centuries have proven more than adequate for just such a task. Will that be said of our generation of Christians as well?

For reflection or discussion

1. "We can learn to appreciate beauty, treasure goodness, and stand for truth if we will study Scripture, appreciate our Christian heritage, and learn from those in whom the Spirit of God is working today." Do you believe this is true? Why or why not? Suggest some ways you might begin to engage these resources more consistently:
2. Most Christians don't do much serious reading or study, especially not in our Christian cultural heritage. Does the local church have a responsibility here for transmitting our cultural heritage to its members? Why or why not?
3. It should be obvious that culture does not "naturally" improve in the direction of what is ennobling, decent, honorable, beautiful, and good. Why is this so? Can we expect this situation to change if Christians fail to engage culture in the ways we've been considering in this study?
4. What's the most important thing you've learned from these studies?
5. How do you intend to apply this lesson in your walk with and work for the Lord?

Next steps: Which of the three "braces" of your "culture stool" do you most need to bolster – Scripture, Christianity's cultural heritage, or today's Spirit-filled cultural voices? Ask some Christian friends for advice in how to improve these areas.

For prayer:

The Fellowship of Ailbe

The Fellowship of Ailbe is a spiritual fellowship in the Celtic Christian tradition. Our goal is to promote revival, renewal, and awakening, following the teaching of Scripture and the example and heritage of our forebears in the faith.

The Fellowship of Ailbe offers many opportunities for training, prayer, personal growth, and ministry. Visit our website at www.ailbe.org to learn more.

We hope you found this study helpful. If so, please consider making a gift to The Fellowship. You can contribute to our ministry by using the donate button at the website, or by sending your gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, 19 Tyler Dr., Essex Junction, VT 05452.

Thank you.