

The Purpose of Culture

It's all about love. Really.

A ReVision Resource from The Fellowship of Ailbe



T. M. Moore

The Fellowship of Ailbe

The Purpose of Culture

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The Purpose of Culture

Contents

Welcome to <i>The Purpose of Culture</i>	4
1 Made for Culture	5
2 Culture as Means and End	7
3 Love as the End of Culture	9
4 Culture as a Means to Love	11
5 Confronting Unloving Culture (1)	13
6 Confronting Unloving Culture (2)	15
7 Guideline for a Culture of Love	17

The Purpose of Culture

Welcome to *The Purpose of Culture*

Welcome to *The Purpose of Culture*, a look at how God intends us to use the culture we engage in to love Him and our neighbors. *The Purpose of Culture* is one of our *ReVision* studies in Biblical worldview.

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're happy to provide this study at no charge. If you find these studies helpful, we hope you'll consider sending a gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, to help us in making these resources available to others.

May the Lord bless your study of His Word.

T. M. Moore
Principal

1 Made for Culture

For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but faith working through love. Galatians 5.6

Sound the alarm?

In recent months many Christians have begun to express heightened concern over the state of American culture. Words like “degraded”, “debased,” and “decadent” fill the Christian blogosphere, and calls for “cultural renewal” can be heard on every hand.

This, of course, is a good thing. We should be encouraged that more believers are taking seriously the Bible’s call for them to pursue our twofold mandate of making disciples and exercising godly dominion over all things.

We can’t escape culture, so we should work to make the most of it for the honor of Jesus Christ and the progress of His Kingdom. Human beings are made for culture. By our culture – the various artifacts we use each day, the institutions which organize our social lives, and the conventions of language, manners, and so forth that govern our being-in-the-world – by our culture we define, sustain, and enrich our lives. We are made in the image of God, and, since God is the Maker *par excellence*, we should expect that we also would make and use culture.

It’s not a question of *whether* Christians should be involved in culture. The question is not *whether*, but *how*. And beyond that, even, the question is, “To what end should we engage the culture of our lives?”

Put another way, what is culture *for*? How should we engage culture to accomplish the larger purposes for which we take culture up in the first place, and what, precisely, are those larger purposes?

Standards of culture

When Christians think about engaging culture we should look to the Bible for guidance, since the Scriptures are the Word of God which He has provided to equip us for every good work (2 Tim. 3.15-17). Historically, Christians have been guided in their cultural activities by such standards as beauty, goodness, and truth. Culture is valid and useful to the extent it rises to one or another of these standards. The pages of Christian history are filled with examples of cultural achievement to which we can look for understanding into what these standards look like as we begin to realize them in cultural creation and activity.

Culture comes to us as a gift of God and the product of human thinking and making. Not all culture fulfills its God-given purpose, as we know. Culture becomes debased and even dangerous when it loses sight of God’s purpose for it and takes on a mind of its own. Once culture-makers and culture-users abandon God’s purpose for culture, standards such as “beauty, goodness, and truth” become arbitrary templates amenable to whatever seems right in anybody’s eyes.

The purpose of culture

So it’s not enough just to have standards to guide us in our cultural endeavors and engagement. We must look beyond the standards of culture to the *purpose* of culture, and the purpose of culture – all culture, in every age and category – is the glory of God, expressed as love.

For the Christian, nothing matters but faith working through love in every area of life. God gives human beings culture because it can be a useful tool in making known His presence, character, and purposes, and these can all be summarized in the word, “love.” The goal, purpose, and end of culture is love. God is love, and those who make and use culture in His name must do so in line with the requirements of love. Once we

The Purpose of Culture

understand this, we can begin to make and use culture in ways that truly reflect God’s intentions and, thus, enable us to know His pleasure in every area of life.

I rather suspect, however, that most people who make and use culture – including those whose cultural activities we might regard as debased or decadent – can argue that they love what they’re doing, and they’re doing it out of love for themselves and others like them. Indeed, even a casual look at or listen to pop culture today will reveal the presence throughout of various expressions of “love.”

So it’s not enough to say that “love” is the goal and purpose of culture. We need to make sure we know what we mean by that notion, and that we use culture in ways appropriate for it to serve as a valid means and end to love.

For reflection or discussion

1. What do you think about when you hear the word, “culture”? Does culture have anything to do with Christian faith? Explain.
2. Under each of the following headings, jot down some samples of culture in which you are presently involved:

Artifacts (Things)

Institutions

Conventions

3. What are some passages from Scripture that guide you in thinking about each of the following:
 - Beauty?
 - Goodness?
 - Truth?
4. Why is it important that Christians should become more self-conscious of their involvement with culture? What happens in culture when we are not?
5. What are your goals for this study? What do you hope to learn?

Next steps: Make a list of all the cultural activities you have been involved in thus far today – the things you’ve used, conversations you’ve held, ways you’ve behaved in conformity to some cultural convention or other. Can you say that you have engaged each of these activities consciously out of a motive of love, or to the end of love? Share your thoughts about this with a Christian friend.

Prayer:

2 Culture as Means and End

*You have ascended on high,
You have led captivity captive;
You have received gifts among men,
Even from the rebellious,
That the LORD God might dwell there.* Psalm 68.18

God in the gifts

This Old Testament text is extremely important, because it establishes a course or trajectory, as well as divine expectations, for the development of human culture from the days of Christ onward.

Paul quoted this text in Ephesians 4.7, 8, where he was exhorting believers to use all the gifts God has given them through the grace of Jesus and the power of His Spirit. Here's the way Paul puts it: "But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ's gift. Therefore He says, /'When He ascended on high, /He led captivity captive, /And gave gifts to men.'"

Now if you were paying attention you will note two differences, one major and one minor, between Paul's use of Psalm 68.18 and the text as it appears at the beginning of this column.

The Old Testament text says that, upon ascending to the heavens, the Lord began "receiving" gifts from people. Apparently, when the Old Testament was translated into Greek prior to the coming of Christ – a version we call the Septuagint – the translators rendered the phrase, "receiving gifts among men", as "gave gifts to men." It's not clear why they made this change – perhaps they had access to some better Hebrew manuscripts – but whatever their reason, Paul endorsed it. Upon His ascension to the right hand of God, the Lord Jesus Christ, together with the Father, poured out the Holy Spirit among the peoples of the earth and with Him, gave a variety of gifts for people to use in their everyday lives.

The second difference we note in Paul's rendering of this text is the absence of the phrase, "even among the rebellious, that the LORD God might dwell *there*." The absence of this phrase in Paul's usage implies that he accepts it without having to say so. The Lord Jesus has given gifts to people – all kinds of gifts to do all kinds of things, even to people who do not love Him – in order that, in some way, by various means, He Himself might be present in the exercise of those gifts.

God's goal for culture, in other words, is the manifestation of Himself, His glory, and His love.

A witness to the Lord

This lavish bestowing of gifts, even gifts of making and using culture, is not new to the New Testament. Nor is it a new idea that God should use culture to declare something about Himself. God has always been doing this, as is clear from Acts 14.17, where Paul advised a community of pagan people that gifts of culture, in the form of *agriculture*, had been given to them by God so that the people would see in these wonders a witness to the living God Himself.

The mysteries of sowing, the strenuous work of harvesting, and the joys of consuming the work of one's hands have been given to all peoples and nations as a way of directing their thoughts to God. God, in a sense, inhabits the culture-making activities of men as the Giver of those abilities, and He intends that those activities should bear witness to Him and His love.

The Purpose of Culture

So the *end* for which God gives gifts of culture is so that He might be known, and the culture those gifts produce can be a powerful *means* for bearing witness to the Lord. Christians need to understand this, and to devote themselves, wherever they have presence and influence, to shaping culture according to the intentions of God, so that all culture will bear witness to Him.

And this means that we must strive to make, use, and reform culture so that God is known and loved, and that, loving Him, we will love our neighbors as He does, and seek only their edification and wellbeing.

An impossible challenge?

This might seem like an impossible challenge. I mean, how is it possible to use and shape our cultural lives so as to honor God and promote an environment of love?

The Apostle Paul, however, is not sympathetic to such balking at our cultural calling. He tells us to do everything – and to use everything – in ways that point to God, honor God, display the character of God, and further the Kingdom purposes of God on earth as in heaven (1 Cor. 10.31).

It must be possible, therefore, and so it remains for us to consider more carefully what achieving a culture expressing the love of God will require of us.

For reflection or discussion

1. In what sense or senses can we say that culture is a gift of God?
2. What does God mean by indicating He wants to “dwell” in the gifts of culture-making He has given human beings?
3. What would be some example of culture – artifacts, institutions, or conventions – in which you can presently see that God is dwelling there, making His love known?
4. Do you think it’s possible that this can be true of our everyday culture, and of all our cultural engagement? Why or why not?
5. What do you see as the greatest obstacles to overcome in achieving a culture of love? How can Christians help one another in tackling these?

Next steps: What are some ways that you can see the presence of the Lord in the cultural gifts of people? Talk about this with some friends. What does this suggest about the ways we use the culture of our own lives each day?

Prayer:

3 Love as the End of Culture

Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing, but keeping the commandments of God is what matters. Let each one remain in the same calling in which he was called. 1 Corinthians 7.19, 20

The Law of love

If you have been paying attention during this series, you will note that this quotation from 1 Corinthians 7 sounds remarkably like the one we used to open this series. There, citing Galatians 5.6, we quoted Paul as saying, “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but faith working through love.” Paul’s wording is neither mistaken nor accidental. For Paul, keeping the commandments of God is the way to show love for God and neighbors.

But then, Jesus said exactly the same thing.

He explained that all the Law and the prophets are fulfilled in the commands to love God and our neighbors (Matt. 22.34-40). The whole of the Old Testament, from Genesis to Malachi, is given to equip us for good works of love (2 Tim. 3.15-17). Contrary to what many of us may think about the Law of God, it’s not this horrible burden and yoke, the keeping of which threatens to turn us all into little legalists vainly pursuing a salvation by works. Keeping the Law of God, and encouraging others to do so, is the way to greatness in the Kingdom of God.

At least, that’s what Jesus taught (Matt. 5.17-19).

The Law of God is a law of love, a sure and reliable guide to lead us in paths of love for God and neighbor. And even a cursory examination of the Law of God reveals that it addresses itself to all manner of cultural issues and concerns.

The Law and culture

For example, the Law of God provides guidance in things like marriage and family life, the education of children, conducting business in the marketplace, making scales and using money, pursuing justice in courts of law, using the arts to the glory of God, what to eat, how to dress, how to honor your neighbors and care for the poor, how to conserve natural resources, and even how to conduct international relations.

These are all cultural issues and activities, and the Law of God, which is given to teach us how to love, speaks to them all.

And *what* the Law of God teaches are the best ways to pursue all such cultural activities so as to refract the character of the eternal God into our everyday lives, so that we glorify Him even in such mundane cultural activities as eating and drinking.

God gave His Law to Israel not to enslave them, but to liberate them into a culture and society where love provided the guiding norms and practice. This is why James refers to the Law of God as “the law of liberty” (Jms. 2:12), and counsels us to live in every aspect of our lives according to this divinely-provided standard. The righteous person, who certainly knows how to use culture in ways that demonstrate love for God and neighbor, meditates on the Law of God throughout the day (Ps. 1). The Law and commandments of God are holy and righteous and good, says the Apostle Paul (Rom. 7.12). The Law of God illuminates the pathways of love, John explained (1 Jn. 5.1-3).

The Purpose of Culture

And what we say about the Law of God we say about all of Scripture. The Law of God is to the rest of holy Scripture as the acorn to the oak. A growing oak brings changes to the acorn, to be sure, but the essence and ultimate purpose remain the same. The Law of God teaches us to read all of Scripture not just in “spiritual” ways but in social, moral, and cultural ways, so that the whole of life will be formed by the teaching of divine revelation, and we will be fully equipped for every good work, including all the work of culture (2 Tim. 3:15-17).

Right where you are

And we don’t have to go far or attain some position of stature in order to love God, obey His commandments, and transform culture into a culture of love.

Paul says we should each one remain in the calling – the place, occupation, relationships, roles, and responsibilities – in which we came to the Lord, and serve Him there by obeying His Word in every detail of our everyday lives. That’s not to say we can’t change jobs or get married or move to a new place; it simply means that obeying God’s Law and living according to His Word, so that love for God and neighbors blossoms daily in and through us, can and must occur wherever we go in our walk with the Lord.

We can and must fulfill God’s purpose for the culture of our lives. Our witness to Him absolutely depends on our doing so.

For reflection or discussion

1. Do you agree with the basic premise of this article, namely, that the Law of God is a law of liberty and love? Why or why not?
2. Explain what T. M. means by saying that the Law of God is to the rest of Scripture like the acorn to the oak:
3. Meditate on 2 Timothy 3:15-17. Why is this passage relevant to a discussion of culture?
4. Summarize what you would describe as your present “condition” – jot down as much as you can that describes your everyday situation in life:
5. Do you believe that God can use this as a fountain and epicenter for achieving a culture of love? Why or why not? What are some ways your “condition” will need to change in order for this to happen?

Next steps: Can it be true that the Law of God is a law designed to school us in the ways of love? Meditate on the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20:1-17). How can you see that these are designed, not to save us, but to enable us to live by the principles of love in the context of God’s gracious salvation? Talk with some Christian friends about this.

Prayer:

4 Culture as a Means to Love

And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love to one another and to all... 1 Thessalonians 3.12

Some obvious examples

We have seen that the *end* of culture, the reason God has given gifts of culture to human beings, is so that His presence and character of love may be made known. The purpose of culture is to bring love for God and love for our neighbors into the light of day, unto the glory of God.

The Law and all the Word of God guide us in seeking to glorify God in every aspect of our lives, so that, whatever we're doing or whomever we're with, the outcome we seek is love, thus making the character of God known in personal and palpable ways.

Culture is an excellent tool for showing the love of God. There are many obvious examples of this in the Scripture, and we should perhaps mention a few.

Let's think first of all in terms of culture used to show love for God. Abel made a sacrifice to honor God, giving up of his own flock in order to glorify the Lord. Noah built an ark as an act of loving obedience to God and love for His creatures. Abraham built altars, the people of Israel built a Tabernacle and, later, a Temple, and David wrote wonderful songs. All of this was done in an effort to say to God, "We hear You, Lord, and we're grateful for Your redeeming grace and steadfast love, and here's how we want to show You our love."

There are also many examples in Scripture of culture being used to show love for others. The making of books, for example, or showing hospitality to others. Creating a fund at one's church to care for the widows and the poor. Establishing officers as shepherds in the church, in order to care for God's flock. Preaching the Gospel to lost people. These are all examples of culture put to use in ways designed to show love for others.

So it's clear that at least certain aspects of culture can be used to show love for God and our neighbors. But does this mean that *all* our cultural activities should be so intended?

The abiding thing

According to Paul, love is the quintessential virtue (1 Cor. 13.13). When all else fades and is gone, love will remain. The Christian must do nothing but what is motivated by love for God and neighbors. We must strive to increase in love and to be more consistent in it. If we're going to engage our cultural lives for anything other than love of God and neighbors, that would create a diversion from our primary purpose and calling.

Faith working by love (Gal. 5.6) is the full-time calling of the believer, no matter what his calling or station in life (1 Cor. 7.19, 20).

So whatever our cultural interests and activities may be, whatever kinds or forms of cultural engagement we may take up, we must, if we are to be consistent, make certain that love for God and neighbors are the guiding principles behind all we do.

This may involve something as simple as paying more attention to our cultural lives, with a view to serving God in all kinds of cultural ways. The fool says in his heart that there is no God, and so he doesn't have to think about how God might be honored or His character displayed in his cultural activities. Christians must not live this way, as Paul insisted (Eph. 5.15-17). The Christian trusts in the Lord with all his heart and leans

The Purpose of Culture

only on the understanding of God and the mind of Christ so that, in all our activities, we acknowledge, serve, and display the reality of the living God, Who is love (Prov. 3.5, 6; 1 Cor. 2.16).

There is no place in our cultural activities for whatever is merely self-serving or self-aggrandizing. We have been redeemed by Jesus Christ to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love our neighbors as we love ourselves, and not ourselves to the exclusion of our neighbors.

It's clear we're going to have to give our cultural activities some more careful thought and prayerful consideration.

We may, of course, engage in cultural activities in order to prepare or refresh ourselves, so that we become better equipped to love our neighbors in meaningful ways; but we must never lose sight, in whatever we may be doing, of the overarching requirement of all culture and life, which is to show love to God and neighbors as the one abiding thing.

For reflection or discussion

1. It would be possible to say that, apart from culture, it is impossible to show love for God or others. How do you respond to this statement?
2. For many people, involvement in the everyday culture of their lives is a fairly "mindless" activity. Why is this so? Is this a good thing? Why or why not?
3. Suggest some ways of becoming more "mindful" about your own engagement with culture:
4. Read the last paragraph of this article again. Do you agree? Why or why not?
5. How would you explain the idea of a "culture of love" as you are coming to understand it to this point in our study?

Next steps: Today, explain to another believer what we mean by the term, "a culture of love." How does your friend respond?

Prayer:

5 Confronting Unloving Culture (1)

Finally, brothers, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy – meditate on these things. Philippians 4.8

Where cultural judgment must begin

These words of the Apostle Paul have a curiously cultural ring, don't you think? True, noble, just, pure, lovely, commendable, virtuous, praiseworthy – these sound like terms we would use to extol the virtues of some book we've read, film we've seen, or performer we admire. These are the kinds of qualities we would like to see in our politicians and educators and culture-makers, because we believe that if they were more people like this, the culture they created and produced would be more like this, too, as would we who use that culture to define, sustain, and enrich our lives.

And we're right, of course.

But not just about the movers and shakers of our contemporary culture. The same applies to us. When it comes to working for a culture of love – as opposed to a culture of mere narcissistic self-indulgence – it is time, as the Apostle Peter might say, for judgment to begin in each of our souls (1 Pet. 4.17).

In each of our souls seeds of a culture committed to something other than love for God and neighbor have been sown and are germinating. And, sadly, in many of us, those seeds are being watered and cultivated, perhaps without our realizing the choking danger such self-indulgent cultural ideas and forms can pose.

Dangerous seeds

In the parable of the soils Jesus warned that, when the field of our souls is sown with the tares of this world's diversions and concerns, they will grow up and smother the fruit of true righteousness and love (Mk. 4.1-20). Many of us are opening our souls to the sowing of such cultural seed-thoughts by the culture we indulge and the way we engage it. These seeds will bear cultural fruit in our everyday lives, and in ways other than love for God and neighbor.

Each of us must engage in a continuous searching of our souls to determine where these dangerous seeds may lie, and to root them out before they bear fruit. In your thought-life, your desires and aspirations, your priorities and values, you have been pummeled by advertising and pop culture with the spores and pollen of a culture of self-indulgence, and unless you deal with this continually, it will choke off your ability to engage culture in ways that consistently evidence love for God and neighbors.

Time for introspection

We need to take time specifically to reflect on the state of our souls with respect to our cultural lives. As we shine the light of God's Law and Word into the dark recesses of our minds and hearts, we will be able to discover anything lurking there that can keep us from glorifying God with our cultural lives. As we listen in patient prayer for the convicting voice of the Spirit of God, He will warn us against this or that cultural form or idea and guide us into the truth of God's Word for our cultural lives.

This is not a call for us to take up some new and exotic spiritual discipline. It is rather a challenge to engage in prayer and the reading of Scripture in deeper, broader, and more reflective and revealing ways than we have perhaps been used to thus far.

The Purpose of Culture

Two Scriptures can guide us in this, and I recommend that you memorize them both and put them on note cards in prominent places so that you'll see them every day. The first is Psalm 139:23, 24: "Search me, O God, and know my heart;/Try me, and know my anxieties;/And see if *there is* any wicked way in me,/And lead me in the way everlasting." As you pray this, let all the different aspects of your cultural life float before your mind – what you watch on TV, your conversations at work, how you do your job, your manner of dress, everything. Listen to the Spirit as He seeks to guide you in ways excellent, lovely, beautiful, and true, and repent of anything that doesn't fit those ideals.

The second passage is Psalm 119:59, 60: "I thought about my ways,/And turned my feet to Your testimonies./I made haste, and did not delay/To keep your commandments." If we spent more time during the day actually thinking about and evaluating our cultural lives, we might discover new ways of using our cultural activities to show love for God and neighbor, according to His Law and Word.

It's time for some serious confronting of unloving culture, and this work must begin in the souls of each one of us.

For reflection or discussion

1. How many different ways does the narcissistic and self-serving culture of our age assault your soul each day? How mindful are you of the insinuating presence and power of these seeds of culture?
2. In what ways does contemporary culture fail the test of a culture of love?
3. What dangers attach to any culture that does not focus on the ideas of loving God and others?
4. How can Psalm 139:23, 24 help us to be a more positive force in working to achieve a culture of love?
5. How can Psalm 19:59, 60 help us to be a more positive force in working to achieve a culture of love?

Next steps: Off the top of your head, can you think of any cultural activities in your own life that don't rise to the standard Paul outlined in our text for today? Write down the two passages recommended for today, and share them with some Christian friends, explaining how you intend to use these in confronting any areas of unloving cultural engagement in your own soul. Invite them to do the same.

Prayer:

6 Confronting Unloving Culture (2)

Then Paul, looking earnestly at the council, said, "Men and brethren, I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day." And the high priest Ananias commanded those who stood by him to strike him on the mouth. Then Paul said to him, "God will strike you, you whitewashed wall! For you sit to judge me according to the law, and do you command me to be struck contrary to the law?" Acts 23.1-3

Sic 'em!

I have to tell you, this is one of my favorite passages in the whole of Scripture.

Here is Paul, stung by an abuse of culture and a transgression of civility, laying into the highest religious official in Israel, complete with name-calling and threats of retribution from God.

I love it.

C'mon. You love it too, because we've all felt this way at one time or another. We see the way people use public office for mere self-aggrandizement, or produce culture that is demeaning and disgusting. We hear the language people use and see the slip-shoddy way they do their work, and we recognize that, hey, these people don't care about anybody but themselves, and it ticks us off big time.

So sic 'em.

That's what Paul did. It's what Jesus did in the temple, when He whipped up on the money-changers who were abusing their cultural privileges at the expense of others. It's what Elijah did when he humiliated the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel. Moses and Aaron, Daniel, Jeremiah, Peter, and John – throughout the Scriptures we find evidence of God's people weighing in against the unloving cultural activities of self-serving individuals, and they don't spare the rod as they bring the hammer of judgment down.

Of course, we have to practice all the nuances of speaking truth in love. Nevertheless, as Paul and all the others managed to have a good – and loving – conscience toward God and men when they challenged the unloving culture of their day, so must we.

We're engaged in a conflict of worldviews with a culture of narcissism, relativism, and self-indulgence, and we're gonna have to knock over a few idols along the way to achieving a culture of love.

Guidelines for engaging unloving culture

Allow me to suggest a few guidelines for addressing forms of culture which are focused on something other than love for God and neighbors.

First, make sure you know whereof you speak. Over the years, lots of rumors have been circulated throughout the Christian community about this or that atheist and what he or she is alleged to have said, this or that corporation and its diabolically subtle undermining of traditional values, or this or that musical group, filmmaker, or author, concerning his motives in what he does. Before you turn over the tables of these cultural purveyors in your Sunday school class or on the Internet, make sure you have your facts straight. Do some research. Get your own quotes from those writings or products you intend to confront. Let their own words and ways speak against them as you challenge their abuse or misuse of the culture entrusted to them.

Second, moderate your response. Yes, I know Jesus used a whip and Paul resorted to name-calling. But we are neither Jesus nor Paul, and so it's likely that, if we resort to great passion in responding to abuses or

The Purpose of Culture

misuses of culture, we'll end up looking worse than the fools we're trying to expose. Use questions in your response. Guard against hyperbole, *ad hominem* arguments, and facile conclusions. Speak the truth in love, but speak it plainly and clearly, so that there's no mistaking you do not approve of that which you are denouncing, and for good *reasons*.

Finally, wherever possible, confront those who are perverting the truth through their abuse or misuse of culture in a private setting. Think of Jesus and Nicodemus, Peter and Cornelius, or Daniel and Nebuchadnezzar (Dan. 4).

To whatever extent you can, try to develop a relationship with those whose cultural activities you intend to challenge. Take a co-worker out for coffee. Work through email to get to know a writer. Talk with a fellow believer in private. Give those who are misusing or abusing their cultural privileges the opportunity of reflecting on and amending their ways in private, but don't hesitate to speak the truth in love wherever it is appropriate to do so.

Look, if we don't stand up against unloving forms of culture, we'll be overwhelmed by them.

Remember Paul in front of the high priest, and go get 'em.

For reflection or discussion

1. What opportunities are available to the Christian community to confront any aspects of an unloving local culture?
2. What happens in those who promote a narcissistic, materialistic, and self-serving culture when no one confronts them about what they're doing?
3. What should be the role of church preaching and teaching in equipping church members to confront unloving culture, in themselves and in the world?
4. How can Christians help one another in this challenge of confronting unloving culture?
5. What are a few steps you plan to take in order to become more aware of and responsive to the unloving culture around you?

Next steps: Can you think of any situations in your life right now where someone is using culture in other than loving ways? Is there anything you can do about this? How might you begin to seek to change this cultural practice and, thus, improve the cultural environment toward a more loving culture?

Prayer:

7 Guideline for a Culture of Love

“Therefore, whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets.” Matthew 7.12

Full circle

Beyond simply confronting cultural abuse and misuse, Christians must make a conscientious effort to restore culture so that it serves as a means and end to the glory of God by demonstrating the love He intends all people to know.

All Christians are immersed in culture. As I have previously said, people are made for culture. We can't escape it, and we can't do without it. All the everyday things we use, the conversations we engage, the work we do, everything about our homes, manners, avocations, and interests – all this is culture, and we are engaged with it all our waking moments.

The challenge to the Christian is to remember that Jesus Christ is reconciling the world to God. His Spirit and Word are at work in the world to bring forth the glory of God for all to see, so that more people may know the wonder and joy of the steadfast love and faithfulness of God, and so that they might be influenced for love by the manifestations of God's glory they see.

Principally, as we've seen, God intends to bring His glory to light through those He has redeemed and come to indwell by His Spirit. Thus, in every aspect of our lives, and in all our cultural activities, we must be diligent to allow the glory of God to show through in us, so that the love God has for humankind and the world can be plainly seen by all.

Prepare your mind

The Apostle Peter encouraged a community of Christians who were beginning to experience the animosity of their neighbors to hold the line for Christ, and, by the exercise of their own unique gifts and callings, to advance the presence and rule of King Jesus, even in the midst of a hostile environment. He called them to prepare their minds to act in ways that would glorify God (1 Pet. 1.13).

If these Christians were going to stand out as true followers of Christ, they would have to apply themselves to careful planning and continual vigilance, so that they made the most of every opportunity to further a culture of love.

This is good advice for us as well. Jesus prescribed a simple but profound mindset for everything we do in this world: *Think* about what you want others to do for you, and *do* the same for them.

In the self-centered culture of our day people tend to do unto others whatever others do unto them, or whatever they suspect others might be thinking about doing unto them. This is not the way to build a culture of love. We who desire to know and enjoy the love of God above all else must devote ourselves to the task, in all our cultural activities, as in all our relationships, of showing the love of God to others in ways we would want it shown to us.

A few examples

I want to end this series with us thinking in very practical terms about how such a mindset might guide us, day by day, in the pursuit of a culture of love.

For example, what you *don't* want to happen to you during the day is for selfish, grumpy, conniving people to take advantage of you or try to make you miserable. So how do you keep from being such a person yourself?

The Purpose of Culture

Obviously, begin your day with the Lord, and go with Him from your time of reading and meditation to a daily walk of circumspection and prayer, yielding every moment of your time and everything you do to His will and Spirit (Eph. 5.15-21; Phil. 2.12, 13).

Second, it might be nice if people spoke with you during the day, especially if their conversation was interesting, showed concern for you and your wellbeing, and left you feeling edified and, well, loved. Can you be such a conversationalist with others? If you plan for it, pray continually about it, and commit all your conversations to the Lord, you'll be surprised at what He can do.

The same applies to all the rest of your life. If you want the people at your job to give their all and do excellent work, then lead the way by your own example. How you drive your car, the manner in which you take your meals, the music you listen to, the websites you peruse – indeed, *every single one of your cultural activities* needs to be engaged with this one thought in mind: In order to glorify God in our cultural lives, and to promote love for God and neighbors by means of our cultural activities, we must keep the Golden Rule in mind, and take it seriously as a simple but profound guide for achieving a culture of love.

For reflection or discussion

1. Suggest some practical ways that more consistent use of the Golden Rule might begin to transform your own approach to engaging culture:
2. Why is it important that, in working toward a culture of love, we not think of culture only in terms of the “cultural” things – music, film, politics, morality, etc. – that many people think of when “culture” comes to mind?
3. What can churches do to help their members take a more responsible role in working to achieve a culture of love?
4. What's the most important lesson you've learned from these studies?
5. How are you planning to make that lesson a more consistent part of your own culture-making and culture-using life?

Next steps: Try this out with a few of the cultural opportunities you're likely to engage today: Your dress, demeanor, conversations, work ethic, life at home, leisure time. Make a list of what today's cultural engagements will look like. Then, beside each item, jot down one way you might apply the Golden Rule to that activity. Share your list with a Christian friend, and ask him or her to pray for you as you work to achieve a culture of love in your own personal life.

Prayer:

The Fellowship of Ailbe

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Thank you.