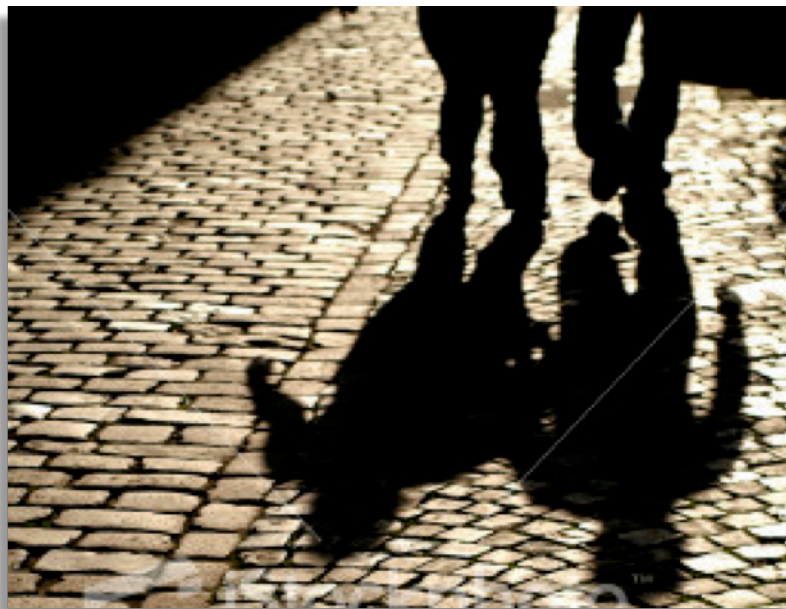


REDEEMING CULTURE

Mission Partners Study 5



T. M. MOORE

The Fellowship of Ailbe



Redeeming Culture
Mission Partners Study 5
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Redeeming Culture

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Welcome to *Redeeming Culture*

Welcome to *Redeeming Culture*, a brief overview of the nature and potential of culture, and of the Christian's calling to redeem culture from the effects of sin. *Redeeming Culture* is the fifth of our six Mission Partner studies. The six studies in this series include:

- Sent like Jesus* – If we really want to live, we have to live like Jesus.
- To Fill All Things* – Jesus Christ through you to your world!
- Seasoned with Grace* – Talking with others about the grace of God.
- Lived Truth* – Our mission begins with *being* witnesses for Christ.
- Redeeming Culture* – We can't avoid or escape culture, so we need to transform it.
- Confident Witness* – How to be bolder and more effective in sharing your faith.

These studies are provided for Mission Partners to help you in identifying and working your Personal Mission Field in the Kingdom of God and Christ.

Redeeming Culture takes into consideration the various cultural arenas that make up our Personal Mission Fields – home, neighborhood, work, school, community, church, and so forth. Jesus is working in and through us to fill these arenas with Himself, as we have seen. How does He do that? More importantly, how can we make sure that we are being used as He intends to bring His beauty, goodness, and truth to light in and through the cultural arenas to which He has sent us?

The Mission Partners program is designed to help you understand and make the best use of those daily disciplines that can allow you to follow Jesus with into more of the presence, promise, and power of the Kingdom of God.

Here are the assignments for Month 5 of your Mission Partners project:

Video: Lift Up Your Eyes!

Study: *Redeeming Culture*

- Tasks:
1. Pray daily for the people you will see in your PMF that day.
 2. Initiate or continue conversations with people in your PMF; be yourself!
 3. Pray through your testimony and the Gospel at least weekly.
 4. Be alert for “open door” opportunities in your PMF.
 5. Share any “open door” opportunities you experienced with your Mission Partner.
 6. Watch Mission Partners *Resource Video 2*, explaining two aids available to you.

These studies are designed for use with a Mission Partner. For more information on the Mission Partners program, visit our website, www.ailbe.org.

We're pleased to offer the Mission Partners program, and the studies that go with it, at no charge. If you find these studies helpful, please consider making a gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe. Information on how to contribute to The Fellowship of Ailbe can be found at the end of this study.

T. M. Moore
Principal

1 The Inevitability of Culture

The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to tend and keep it. Genesis 2.15

Creatures of culture

Human beings are creatures of culture. There's just no escaping the fact.

We're not the only creatures which engage in cultural activities, as we know that many creatures communicate through forms of language, build particular kinds of nests, make and use certain tools, and even sing, play, and dance.

But the "culture" which animals make and use can hardly be compared with the multifaceted, variegated, sophisticated, and ever-changing cultural activities of human beings. In fact, so far beyond comparison with the habits of animals are the cultural activities of men, that we reserve the very word, "culture," to refer to the activities of humans alone.

From the very beginning, God intended humans to be creatures of culture. In order to instruct Adam and Eve concerning His will, God used intelligible language. In carrying out His will, we can imagine our first parents thinking creatively about the shape of the garden, the order and priority of their work, the tools that might be required, and much more.

Human beings are, and have been from the beginning, inescapably cultural. We may not like the culture in which we participate, but that can never be an excuse for denying or seeking to avoid cultural engagement. We were made for culture, and it is inevitable that we shall have it, in one form or another.

What is culture?

But what do we mean by "culture"? This word suggests many meanings, but I think we can outline a general definition that is broad enough to enfold everything that human beings think about under the heading of culture.

Culture consists of the artifacts, institutions, and conventions by which human beings define, sustain, and enrich their lives. Let's take a closer look at this definition.

Culture consists of "stuff." It is made up of *artifacts* – like computers, forks and spoons, melodies, literature, paintings, clothing, homes, and much, much more. Some of the artifacts we create are intended to make our lives a bit easier, or perhaps more productive. Others are designed simply to delight us, whether through the eye, the ear, or by participation – such as playing an instrument.

Culture also consists of *institutions* – schools, courts, political parties, forms of government, voluntary associations, churches, businesses, and so forth. Such institutions serve as repositories of values and organs of communal action. We require them because, as institutions, bodies of people working together, they can accomplish more than what any of us might be able to do on our own.

Finally, culture consists of *conventions*, such as driving right (or left), observing holidays, languages and dialects, artistic forms, and various types of manners and social protocols. Some of these conventions may be written down, but many of them have become so much a part of who we are that they are transmitted through the simple, everyday activities of life.

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To define, sustain, and enrich

All such aspects of culture – all our artifacts, institutions, and conventions – are created as ways of *defining* who we are as a people, what we value or find delightful, and how we understand our way of life should be organized and conducted.

Therefore, our culture not only *defines* us, it also helps to *sustain* and *enrich* our lives, giving meaning, value, and enjoyment to our everyday experience. The fact that there are so many different kinds of culture throughout the world is a testimony to the many and varied interests which human beings express, and which, in turn, are a reflection of the image of the infinitely beautiful God in which we are made.

So culture is inevitable, and it has enormous potential to bring good into our lives.

But what happens when culture goes bad, when it turns against us and threatens to do us more harm than good? This is when we need to think about *renewing* culture and *redeeming* it according to God's original purpose for our lives.

For reflection or discussion

1. What comes to mind when you think of the word, "culture"? How do you think most people feel about culture and their involvement with it?
2. Why do we say that culture is inevitable? What is the relationship between culture and the Lordship of Jesus Christ?
3. In what ways does culture play a role in seeking the Kingdom of God?

Next steps: How many artifacts, institutions, and conventions of culture can you identify in your daily life? Jot them down. Then begin to meditate on 1 Corinthians 10.31 and what it might imply for these.

Prayer:

2 The Gift of Culture

*Therefore He says,
“When He ascended on high,
He led captivity captive,
And He gave gifts to men.”* Ephesians 4.8

Gifts for every situation

Two aspects to Paul’s use of this quote from Psalm 68.18 I find fascinating, and they relate to how we should understand culture and its use.

First, Paul applies this text to the ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. The “gifts” he mentions most probably refer, in the first instance, to the spiritual gifts by which believers, filled with the Holy Spirit, do the work of seeking and advancing the Kingdom of God.

But though these are “spiritual gifts” their use is not restricted to what we might think of as “spiritual activities” – whatever those are. The gifts of the Holy Spirit – of teaching, helping, administering, giving, and so forth – apply to every situation in which believers are seeking to advance the rule of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Spirit, which is the Kingdom of God.

Thus, we should expect to see these supernatural endowments come to expression in such everyday activities as working at a marriage, managing a home, carrying out our daily work, enjoying a quiet evening together, writing a poem or an email, or working in a political campaign.

Jesus Christ is Lord of all of life, and He has sent His followers, like salt, light, and leaven, into every nook and cranny of society and culture, fitted with special spiritual endowments from God, in order to bring renewal and transformation into a world darkened by unbelief and sin.

The presence of Christians in any particular cultural situation or activity should, therefore, ensure that a power for righteousness, peace, and joy will be at work there which otherwise that cultural arena might not know. The spiritual gifts God gives to His followers thus become *cultural resources* for creating and transforming the artifacts, institutions, and conventions of our lives, so that these can fulfill their potential to define, sustain, and enrich us and our neighbors.

Thus, by the operation of divine power in and through those who believe, the various forms of culture become themselves gifts of God to benefit the people He loves.

Gifts all around

But there is a second curious aspect to Paul’s use of this quote from Psalm 68.18. Paul chose to quote, not the Hebrew text in this case, which reads “*receiving* gifts among men,” but a version of his own rendering, which, in Paul’s mind, seemed to make better sense of what the Hebrew intended.

So Paul uses “gave to men” rather than “receiving among men” because in his mind this translation captured David’s meaning more precisely. Psalm 68.18 then goes on to read (as italicized, from the ESV), “He gave gifts to men, *even among the rebellious, that the LORD God may dwell there*” (emphasis added). God, in other words, has given gifts for making culture, not only to His redeemed people, but to all human beings, even those who despise Him!

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And this is a very good thing, for if we had to depend on Christians to invent and perfect all the forms of culture we need, we'd still be waiting for things like computers, the Internet, and, of course, much, much more.

God gives human beings abundant cultural gifts and abilities – and since the day of Christ's ascension, those endowments have been multiplied manifold over what the world knew in the days before the coming of the Kingdom of God.

Now, in giving human beings gifts for culture, we can be sure that, since He intended that His glory should dwell in the midst of their cultural activities, God wants those gifts used according to His truth, for the good of all His creatures, and as a reflection of His beauty, goodness, and truth in infinite and wondrous ways.

God has a purpose for human culture, but human beings have not always used their cultural gifts to honor God and benefit their neighbors. When culture departs from its God-given purposes, those who discern this must take up the task of renewing and redeeming culture to the glory of God.

For reflection or discussion:

1. Do you agree that culture is a gift from God? Why or why not?
2. Meditate on Matthew 25.14-30. How does this parable relate to the gift of culture?
3. What would you say are the duties of all those who enjoy the gifts of culture?

Next steps: If Christians regarded all aspects of their cultural lives as a gift from God, and an opportunity for glorifying Him, do you think the people we encounter each week would notice? What would they notice? Talk you're your Mission Partner about these questions.

For prayer:

3 The Corruption of Culture

And Cain knew his wife, and she conceived and bore Enoch. And he built a city, and called the name of the city after the name of his son – Enoch. Genesis 4.17

Something culturally wrong

Human beings are made for culture. They take to it like ducks to water. We see this from the opening pages of the story of human history as this is presented in the Bible.

Here is a religious ceremony, there brothers converse among their cultivated fields, a city is founded, tools and music and animal husbandry appear, a poem with a catchy rhythm pops into the mind of its composer and is recited to his wives.

The gifts of God for making culture are already beginning to proliferate among the earliest human beings, but there is something very desperately wrong with this picture.

The people in the vignettes mentioned above – Cain and his descendants – do not seem to understand the proper use of culture. Cain's offering of a sacrifice to God appears to have been either a self-serving or merely perfunctory act, for that cultural activity was rejected by God. His conversation with his brother, which on previous occasions may have been about who would do which work among the crops on that day, was on *this* day constructed as a ruse to lure Abel out into the field, in order that Cain might kill him, perhaps with one of the implements made for the cultivation of the fields. A city is built, but it bears a man's name, to honor him, not God. Industry and agribusiness appear, but solely for advancing the wealth and power of a particular family, one of whom, puffed up with his cultural achievements, killed at least one man for slighting him in some way, then wrote a poem about his deed and recited it to his wives, as a boast and a warning.

Culture off the tracks

Shortly after the fall into sin, culture went off the tracks. Human beings began engaging in all manner of cultural activities, and a good deal of what they were doing appears to have nothing to do with honoring God and carrying out His true, good, and beautiful purposes on earth. God's gifts of culture-making were obviously at work here, but their use had become corrupted by mankind's rebellion against Him.

Following the fall into sin, culture quickly became a means for gaining advantage over others, building strong tribal and national identities, and suppressing or enslaving those whose cultural achievements did not match up. Every imagination of the thoughts of men's hearts, being only evil continually, was bent on making and using culture in merely self-indulgent ways, and this, as we know, ultimately provoked the judgment of God in the form of the flood against men and their corrupt cultures (Gen. 6).

The entrance of sin into the experience of men could not *but* affect their culture. When men became a law unto themselves, they projected those self-serving ways on every aspect of their lives. They considered that culture was a tool for defining, sustaining, and enriching themselves at everybody else's expense, or, at least, without regard for the needs or interests of others.

It was every man for himself in those early days of culture-making, and this is a condition which, because of the persistence of sin in the human situation, we continue to experience even to this day.

When culture becomes corrupt

Culture becomes corrupt when it is employed according to the whims and passions of men rather than the purposes and standards of God. We hardly need to argue that much of contemporary culture falls into this

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category. Not only are the will and ways of God ignored and flouted, but many aspects of contemporary culture are in all-out rebellion against God and His rule.

This situation demonstrates the power of sin to corrupt culture, so that it becomes, in many ways, a vehicle for lies, a source of evil, and a cause of ugliness of various kinds. When culture falls into this sorry state, it is the duty of those who perceive this condition to do whatever they can to redress it. Christians are the salt, light, and leaven of the world; it is our duty to take every thought, and all of culture, captive for obedience to Jesus Christ, to *redeem* culture from the destructive powers of sin and rebellion, so that it can be renewed for the purposes of God and His glory.

For reflection and discussion

1. What would you look for as indicators that a culture was becoming corrupt?
2. How can you see that corruption tends to spread throughout a culture, and does not merely stay in the arena where it first made entry into a culture?
3. What is the Christian's duty toward the corruption he or she perceives within a culture?

Next steps: In what ways can you see the sinful effects of the fall on the culture of our day? What is the role of the Church in preparing church members to recognize the state of culture and work to redeem it? Talk with your Mission Partner about these questions.

For prayer:

4 The Power of Culture

“Come, let Us go down and there confuse their language, that they may not understand one another’s speech.” So the LORD scattered them from there over the face of all the earth, and they ceased building the city. Genesis 11.7, 8

A name for themselves

The episode of the Tower of Babel demonstrates why it is so important that those who perceive the corruption in their culture do whatever they can to redeem and renew culture according to the purposes of God.

In this brief story we catch a glimpse of how powerful the effects of culture can be on the lives of those who participate in it.

The people of the earth had journeyed as one to a place in the land of Shinar. We do not know what their population was at this time, but it must have been fairly small, since the flood was only a few generations in their past at this point. The people all shared the same culture and language, so it must have been fairly easy for them to hang together as they migrated from the east looking for some place to settle.

In the plain in Shinar they determined to make their stand. There a consensus was reached that they should build a city and, in the middle of that city, a tower, apparently as a focus of their religious devotion. They would employ all their available cultural skills at this task, with the declared objective of making a name for themselves and to keep from being dispersed over all the earth.

The city and tower would provide the strong identity and the communal rituals and protocols that would give the people a sense of significance and purpose. The problem of course, was that these two powerful cultural achievements would serve to orient and lead the people in a direction completely contrary to the good purposes of God. Rather than seek to establish the name of God over all the earth, the people in the plain of Shinar would make a name for themselves in one familiar and convenient locale.

An intervention of grace

The Lord was able to see the trouble in this. If the people of the earth succeeded in this project, they would only go on to do other and more things designed to exalt their own prestige and power (v. 6). The results, over time, would ultimately be the same as those which occasioned the flood: Men would use their cultural forms, and the power those forms accrued for them, to flout the will of God and to oppress and enslave others for the sake of their own names and agendas.

Culture can be a powerful tool in the hands of the few for the corruption and oppression of the many.

So God determined to interrupt their designs and move the people of the earth back onto something that more resembled His agenda for them. He would bring this building project to an end, break up the monolithic social structure of Shinar, and disperse the peoples over all the earth, precisely as He planned.

And all He did in order to accomplish this dramatic change was to introduce the cultural *convention* of new languages.

The peoples’ ability to understand one another now hopelessly confused, they sought out those with whom they could communicate and began to migrate away from the plain of Shinar toward the far ends of the earth. Their project for making a name for themselves was abandoned, and the hubris with which they essayed such a venture was appropriately chastened.

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In spite of their rebellion against God, His grace prevailed – through the medium of a cultural innovation – to offer humankind an opportunity to return to His appointed course.

The challenge to the believer

God used a transformation of culture in order to redeem and reform a cultural situation that was spiraling out of control. Culture can be a powerful resource for helping people to move more deliberately toward fulfilling the divine purpose for their lives, but it may require being redeemed before it can serve that glorious end. For this reason, we must not take culture for granted, and we must not simply leave culture to the corroding and destructive effects of human sin, pride, and self-indulgence.

Rather, each of us needs to become more aware of the opportunities presented to us each day for bringing the beauty, goodness, and truth of God into the cultural arenas of our lives. Believers have the mind of Christ (1 Cor. 2.16), and He is working to make all things new (Rev. 22.5). As we learn to think and act with the mind of Christ in the cultural opportunities before us each day, we can expect to see some of that newness come to light, overcoming the hubris of men and declaring the excellencies of our God.

For reflection or discussion

1. What are some aspects of contemporary culture that you would point to as examples of the power of culture?
2. Why does culture exert such influence over people? That is, how does the power of culture work on our minds, hearts, values, and lives?
3. The printing press is an example of a cultural change that influenced the entire course of human history. What are some other examples of powerful cultural innovations that have changed whole societies? In what ways do you participate in any of these innovations?

Next steps: Meditate on Romans 12.21, 2 Corinthians 10.3-5, and Revelation 21.5. What do you think it will take for you to become an agent of cultural change within your own sphere of influence? Talk with your Mission Partner about this question.

For prayer:

5 Early Redemptive Achievements

“You are the salt of the earth... You are the light of the world...” Matthew 5.13, 14

Lighting the way

In spite of humankind’s rebellious and disastrous use of culture in those early days of the human race, God did not give up on this project, for which He has made and gifted human beings. He is a God of grace, after all, and His grace is, indeed, greater than all our sins.

Throughout the Old and New Testaments God demonstrated an appreciation of culture and showed the way for His people to renew culture and its power for good. The many examples of culture, created and employed to the glory of God and the benefit of people, which we find throughout the Bible, are there, in part, to light the way for God’s people in every culture to work for the redemption of culture in all its forms.

Let’s reflect on just a few of the early redemptive achievements which God’s people made in the area of culture.

The Law of God

Consider, first of all, the Law of God.

Here is a body of law, a code of civil statutes, unlike anything the ancient world had seen. While there is some overlap between the Law of God and the law codes of other ancient cultures – a fact explainable because of all people being made in the image of God – still, the commandments and statutes of ancient Israel are without parallel or precedent.

Here we find encoded an approach to living together in society which is designed to preserve justice, promote neighbor-love, and maximize individual freedom and productivity. So marvelous is the Law of God in fact, that God told His people to expect that the surrounding nations, upon seeing this Law at work, would wonder and applaud the greatness of this cultural achievement (Deut. 4.1-8).

Law is a *convention* common to all human societies, and the Law of God remains today the benchmark of justice and social order.

Ritual and the arts

Next, consider the way that the religion of ancient Israel was able to redeem religious ritual and the arts for the benefit of men and the glory of God.

Every society in those days offered sacrifices and conducted ceremonies for their gods. None was so clearly focused on purifying a people from sin and enhancing their relationship with God as that system of worship which God gave to Israel.

What’s more, in the work of Bezalel and Oholiab, David and Asaph, and Solomon and Hiram, we see examples of the many ways that true religion can affect the practice of architecture and use of such arts as singing, sculpture, tapestry-making, and literary composition. Rather than fear that culture might actually corrupt true religion, God showed His people how to use culture to express their faith in ways that brought Him honor and glory through the *institution* of religion.

The Bible

The creation of the Bible as a literary work of art is but another example of God’s determination to redeem

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culture and make it serve His purposes. It is perhaps easy for us to lose sight of the fact that the Bible is a cultural *artifact* and that, as such, it has exerted tremendous influence and power over peoples and cultures from the very beginning. No single book, and no collection of books or authors, has had such a widespread effect for good on the course of human history as the Bible, which God brought into being through His Spirit working in His people.

The Spirit of God

Finally, the pouring-out of God's Spirit on the Day of Pentecost – a kind of reversing of the curse of Babel – launched a universal power for cultural transformation into the societies of men which has been bringing the blessings of culture to people for nearly 2,000 years. Under the direction and in the power of God's Spirit, Christian people have redeemed culture in a wide range of areas and throughout the cultures of the world, acting as salt, light, and leaven to roll back cultural corruption and begin making all things new in Jesus Christ.

Corrupt cultures can be redeemed. New cultures can be created. Those who believe in God and embrace His Word have shown that we do not simply need to hold our noses and take a deep breath in the face of corrupt cultures. We can change culture. We can redeem culture. And it is the desire and plan of God that His people should do so.

For reflection or discussion

1. Give some examples of cultural *artifacts* used in the Bible to honor God and advance His purposes:
2. Give some examples of cultural *institutions* mentioned in the Bible which honored God and served His purposes:
3. Give some examples of cultural *conventions* mentioned in the Bible which honored God and served His purposes:

Next steps: Think of the culture in which you are engaged week-in and week-out. Where can you see a need for cultural renewal and redemption? Is it possible God might want you to be an agent of cultural change in these arenas? Talk with your Mission Partner about these questions.

For prayer:

6 Culture at Our Fingertips

Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. 1 Corinthians 10:31

Engaging culture

The idea of redeeming culture can be somewhat daunting. We may perhaps think of culture in terms that are so broad and complex that the idea of changing culture or redeeming it for the glory of God seems quite beyond the scope of our abilities.

But if we keep in mind that culture is nothing more than the artifacts, institutions, and conventions by which people define, sustain, and enrich their lives, taking on the task of redeeming culture becomes rather more manageable.

After all, every one of us, every day of our lives, is engaged in culture. We have culture virtually at our fingertips every moment of every day. The question we must seek to work out in all our cultural activities is, “How can I use this culture in such a way as to glorify God Who gave it to me?”

Signaling the world

Paul says “whatever you do” – even down to such everyday things as taking a meal – do it in order to glorify God.

Apparently there are ways of using culture – our table manners, language, style of dress, way of working, how we drive our car and care for our homes, the use we make of TV and films, the emails we write, the phone calls in which we become involved, and all the rest of our culture – there are ways of using such everyday things that will allow us to signal to the world around us that we are aware of an obligation in such cultural activities that extends beyond our own puny selfish interests.

We seek the glory of God in our use of culture.

Guidelines

Paul provides a few guidelines in the verses that follow our text.

We glorify God in our lives when we try to “give no offense” to others in the way we use culture (v. 32). We need to be conscious of the people around us and sensitive to their needs and concerns. Our use of culture should not become a cause for them to take offense at the ways we engage our cultural activities.

Instead, Paul says we should “try to please everyone” in the things we do (v. 33). This doesn’t mean that we become “people-pleasers” rather than pleasers of God. It simply means that, in our use of culture, we’re intentionally thinking about ways to do good to others. We strive for excellence, efficiency, and a joyful disposition in all our cultural activities. We don’t enter into cultural activities merely for our own enrichment, but we’re part of a community, a family, a neighborhood, a staff, or a team, and we have to seek their wellbeing and edification in all we do.

Paul also seems to indicate that our use of culture should reflect our primary concern for communicating the Gospel to the people around us. As far as possible, in all our cultural activities, we should strive to improve the experience of salvation of our Christian friends and to encourage our unsaved neighbors to consider the promises of the Gospel for their own lives (v. 33).

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Finally, Paul tells us simply to “be imitators” of him, as he was an imitator of Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 11.1). Paul was a man with a mission, and he saw everything he did from that perspective and with that emphasis. He made the best use of his time; invested his speech in reaching others for Christ and building up the saints in the life of faith; avoided anything that might cause others to stumble; used his resources and cultural skills for the benefit of others; and sought the progress of the Kingdom at all times. If we follow the example of Paul, it’s a pretty good bet that our cultural activities will become more focused and more fruitful for the cause of Christ.

It is possible for us, in all our involvement with culture, to bring glory to God, to declare and demonstrate to the people around us that we are committed to a realm of truth, beauty, and goodness which transcends the bounds of the secular and relativist order. And if we can learn to use culture like this, then we’ll be well on our way to redeeming whole segments of culture for the purposes of Christ and His Kingdom.

For reflection or discussion

1. Suggest some ways that a Christian might prepare each day in order to make the most of his or her cultural opportunities for the glory of God:
2. Do you agree that it is possible to use “everyday culture” in ways that glorify God? Can you give an example or two from your own experience?
3. Can you think of some areas of everyday culture use where you would like to become more self-consciously involved in using your culture for God’s glory? How might you begin to do that?

Next steps: Would you say that you are following Paul’s guidelines in all your cultural activities? Can you see any area where you can begin to improve? What might you do differently? Talk with your Mission Partner about these questions.

For prayer:

7 Standards for Culture

*I would have lost heart, unless I had believed
That I would see the goodness of the LORD
In the land of the living! Psalm 27.13*

Culture for the glory of God

We have seen that culture is a gift from God, an indispensable resource for bringing fullness and blessing into human lives. Culture has power to accomplish much good, but it can become corrupted by the effects of sin and, if we're not careful, actually end up harming rather than benefiting us.

But just as culture can become corrupt, so also it can be redeemed, laid hold of and refashioned in order to satisfy the purposes of God for good. This work of redeeming culture falls on the shoulders of those who know their God and have accepted the calling to live for His glory in every aspect of their lives, including their cultural activities.

In order to be consistent and effective in this effort, we'll need some standards to guide us in the use we make of culture. Psalm 27 draws together three ideas which, because they derive from the being and character of God, can serve as effective guidelines for us in the work of redeeming culture. These are the ideas of truth, beauty, and goodness.

Truth

"Teach me Your way, O LORD," David prayed in verse 11. He understood that the *truth of God* defined the proper path for every aspect of his life.

Now, David did not always adhere to that truth, but he recognized his failings and shortcomings when confronted with the truth and repented and reformed his life accordingly.

In all our making and use of culture we must be taught of God and guided by His truth. Culture cannot become for us simply a matter of personal preference. There's more to engaging culture than just our taste in music, manners, or merchandise. We are disciples of the One Who is the Truth, and *He* must define the choices and practices that guide our cultural activities, as He teaches and leads us by His Word and Spirit.

Beauty

David also prayed, "One *thing* I have desired of the LORD,/That will I seek:/That I may dwell in the house of the LORD/All the days of my life,/To behold the beauty of the LORD..." (v. 4). The Lord our God is *beautiful* in His being, attributes, purposes, and works. Everything about God radiates glory, majesty, and strength. To gaze upon the beauty of the Lord, as Paul explained in 2 Corinthians 3, is to be transformed by His beauty so that the glory of God comes to expression in all the details of our lives, whatever we do.

We can learn about the beauty of the Lord through His Word in Scripture and creation, including the cultural works of our Christian forebears. Our cultural practices can be beautiful so that they represent the very character and purpose of God, but we must seek the Lord in His beauty if this is to be the case. Beauty is not merely in the eye of the beholder; beauty is in the eye of him who beholds the face of God (v.8; cf. 2 Cor. 4.6).

Goodness

Finally, David declared that he fully believed to see the *goodness* of the Lord in his own time and culture. The goodness of the Lord relates to what God originally intended for His creation, and for the societies of men, before the disaster of sin set everything on a course of corruption, decay, and death. Where the goodness of

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the Lord exists, His original, pure and sinless purposes are being realized. Justice obtains, love abounds, and human beings and all creation flourish. As followers of Jesus Christ we have been redeemed in order to do good works, and this pertains to all our making and use of culture.

Truth, goodness, and beauty: These are not ideas that originated with Greek philosophers. These three standards for life and culture appear over and over in the Scriptures, and they challenge us to learn what each of them requires of us in following Jesus for the redemption of culture. These are words which are embodied most completely in our Lord Jesus Christ – incarnate, dying, rising, reigning in glory, and coming again.

The time is long past for Christians to cease participating mindlessly and selfishly in whatever forms of culture the unbelieving world might cough up next. We are called to bring the truth, beauty, and goodness of God into the everyday lives of people and societies all over the world – to fill the world with Jesus – and we do this by taking seriously our calling to engage and redeem culture for the glory of God.

For reflection or discussion

1. How do you expect your reading and study of Scripture to affect your involvement in culture from this point forward?
2. Suggest some ways that you, like David, might contemplate the beauty of God in a more consistent and more meaningful way. How might Psalm 19.1-4 help you in this?
3. “Goodness” is an aspect of the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5.22, 23). It is also a characteristic of the Law of God (Rom. 7.12). How should each of these factor into your work of redeeming culture?

Next steps: How might you improve your understanding of truth, beauty, and goodness? Why should you do so? Talk with your Mission Partner about these questions.

For prayer:

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Next steps

Make sure you have completed each of the *Next steps* exercises before you meet with your Mission Partner to discuss the following questions. Below, list the *Next steps* efforts and results you'd like to share with your Mission Partner:

Questions for discussion

1. What is culture? Why does it matter? Why should it matter to the work we've been sent to do in our Personal Mission Fields?
2. Do you think most Christians think of culture as a resource for mission? Why or why not?
3. What are you doing to "redeem" the culture of your Personal Mission Field? Where would you like to improve in this effort?
4. What's the most important lesson you've learned from this study?
5. How you are working to incorporate that lesson to your walk with and work for the Lord?

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.