

# Revisiting Culture: Reforming Christian Cultural Identity

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## Abstract

*This paper discusses the impact of Christianity on today's culture, so it is written from a Christian perspective. Culture, whether we realize it or not, has a powerful impact on human life. It shapes people's worldview, thinking patterns, life habits, goals, pursuits, choices, and desires. This paper aims to recall the engagement and activeness of Christians in culture, for if not, then Christianity will not have any impact in people's lives, rather it is the world that will influence and shape Christianity. The method used is a literature review, specifically the fine and incisive literatures on the cultural engagement of Christianity. This discussion of cultural engagement will use a four-question structure: "Who Am I, Where Am I, What's Wrong, and What's the Remedy." It is intended that the results of this study will reawaken the consciousness of every reader to reflect on the urgency of Christian cultural engagement in the formation of culture today. At the end, when Christians could re-engage in culture again, Christ and His lordship will once again shine, influence and permeate all aspects of human life for the glory of God.*

**Keywords:** *culture, cultural engagement, Biblical Christian Worldview, Christian cultural identity, the lordship of Christ*

## Introduction

Today, South Korea is the very centre of today's POP Culture! K-Pop and Korean dramas have had a tremendous effect all over the world in these recent decades. Almost none of young people under 25 that we called Gen Z who don't know Jimin, Kim Soo Hyun, Kim Ji Won, Jennie, etc. - like the previous generations, know the Beatles, Guns N Roses, Michael Jackson, Bonjovi, etc. Then we have a phrase, "tell me an artist or song you know, and I'll tell you how old you are."

Arts – every art: like music, acting, painting, sculpture, craft, is *an artifact*, a visual form of a culture, which is formed by humans and at the same time forms humans. Culture has tremendous impact in our lives. I remember when I was a kid, I took the sheet from my bed and put it around my neck and trying to be Superman. Some girls wanted to be Barbie. And nowadays, maybe our children want to be like K-Pop stars. Many young boys around where I live, every afternoon drifting their cars on a small circuit near my house, because they feel like Dominic Toretto (Fast & Furious saga). We want to be what our culture says it's great to be like him or her, to have this and to have that, to have shape or appearance just like our idols. Most of us know a childhood game called "Simon says" – and we are playing the same game today "Culture says".

How can this happen? Why did humans created by God in His very image have become more obedient to culture than to God? This presentation will not be a rigid extensive academic

discussion. This presentation will be a gentle whisper and invitation for Christian scholars to re-listen to the invitation of our Lord, “*Follow me, and I will make you become fishers of men.*”

Pop-culture has been far more effective fishers of men nowadays than Christians and Christian scholars. Thus, this paper will invite all of us to revisiting culture matters so that we can deeply ponder about how to reform our Christian cultural identity, and finally to be a saltier salt, a brighter light of the world.

The structure of this paper was inspired from the well-known book of Richard Middleton and his co-author Brian Walsh, *The Transforming Vision: Shaping a Christian World View* (InterVarsity, 1984). The structure of this paper is: Who Am I, Where Am I, What’s Wrong, and What’s the Remedy.

## Who Am I

Of course, we know who we are, an image of God – but what does it mean? James Smith explores, that *imago Dei* is not some de facto property of Homo Sapiens (whether will or reason or language or what have you), rather the image of God is a task, a mission.<sup>1</sup>

As Richard Middleton comments, “The *imago Dei* designates the royal office or calling of human beings as God’s representatives and agents in the world, granted authorized power to share in God’s rule or administration of the earth’s resources and creatures. We are commissioned as God’s image bearers, his vice-regents, charged with the task of “ruling” and caring for creation, which includes the task of cultivating it, unfolding, and unfurling its latent possibilities through human making—in short, through *culture*.”

Culture doesn’t mean narrowly only music, movies, dramas, jewellery, fashion – Culture is everything we do, everything we make – as expression or manifestation – of who we are – of cults! What? Are you sure, I am a cult? – as Middleton continues:

For just as no pagan temple in the ancient Near East could be complete without the installation of the cult image of the deity to whom the temple was dedicated, so creation in Genesis 1 is not complete (or ‘very good’) until God creates humanity on the sixth day as *imago Dei*, to represent and mediate the divine presence on earth.

But in this case, it is creation that is the sanctuary, and humanity is commissioned to liturgical service in the cosmic sanctuary. To take up the task of being God’s image bearer is both cultural work and cultic work.<sup>2</sup> As the cult image, we must mediate and reflect God’s presence into this world. This can be a reality through our works and responsibility we are carrying. Doctors, teachers, nurses that serve others with sincere love and intentions to reflect God’s compassion and care to others function as cult image. Their works become a form of worship when they have the intention to repair this world according to God’s will.

Yes, we are the image of God, are the cult images of the One True God, the Creator and Sustainer of the Universe. But we also already know the story after, that humanity have fallen into sin, depraved, and stained by sin in every aspect of our humanity, including in our cultural works. Instead of cultivating the earth through cultural works to worship of and bringing glory to God, we made culture divine, and we submit our whole lives to it, we follow unreservedly what culture demands. Instead of being conformed to God in Christ, we are trying hard to conform ourselves perfectly to today’s culture.

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<sup>1</sup> James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2009), 163.

<sup>2</sup> J. Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Publishing Group, 2005), 27.

But only by the grace of God, He chose to save His people in Christ, through the regeneration works of the Holy Spirit – to renew and transform His people back to His image in Christ and to His calling to be His holy priests and priestesses. As the redeemed and holy priests and priestesses, we are commissioned to actively bringing and transforming the earth to the worship and glory of the One True God, this is our cultural identity.

## Where Am I

The whole earth, the vast universe, the entire creation is our sanctuary to worship. Fujimura rightly says,

Culture is not a territory to be won or lost but a resource we are called to steward with care. Culture is a garden to be cultivated.<sup>3</sup>

Yet the garden has now fallen into sin, then every characteristic of every generation and every culture has always been marked with progression and goodness in some areas, as we know that God's common grace still there faithfully; and at the same time degeneration and flaws infiltrate in all areas of life.

I will mention some of the characteristics of Generation Z, the dominant culture maker and user: Digital Native, Creative, Information Independence, Borderless, Longing for Intimacy, Integrity, Authenticity, Questioning the Way of Thinking, Instant-like, Post Christian (know nothing of Christian values or stories). If these people are the soil of our garden that we should cultivate, then how should we cultivate them? If the soil has produced weeds and thorns, which are polluted cultures, how then we are to clear them and cultivate them again?

Oftentimes, it's not that we don't know what to do, but we don't have the energy to do it, we don't have a community to support us, to provide new breakthrough ideas, to pray for us, and to refresh us. Too often, Christian communities undermine one another. This brings us to the discussion of what is wrong.

## What's Wrong

I must say that we should presuppose sin to be the very heart of the problem, yet sin manifests in the way we think or perceive of culture. Hunter contends that the Christian dominant ways of thinking about culture and cultural change are flawed, even they desire to "change the world", they cannot.<sup>4</sup> Agree with Hunter and Moore, I argue that one of the foundational problems we have about culture is that Christians don't have a same word about culture matters.

Moore proposes six different contemporary Christian approaches to culture:<sup>5</sup>

- 1) **Cultural Indifference:** This is where most of Christians are. They never think about culture, or at least they don't think that culture has anything to do with their faith, and *vice versa*. And in fact, the result is they have simply absorbed the tastes, habits, manners, and cultural preferences of their environment. Their "Christian" cultural practices have become completely the same as the culture around them or the culture of this age. For

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<sup>3</sup> Makoto Fujimura, *Culture Care: Reconnecting with the Beauty for our Common Life* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2017).

<sup>4</sup> James Davidson Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, & Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (Madison Avenue, New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 5.

<sup>5</sup> Terry Michael Moore, *Culture Matters: A Call for Consensus on Christian Cultural Engagement* (Ada, Michigan: Brazos Press, 2007), 12-14.

instance, a lot of Christians consume music, films, or TV shows without considering the relevance of the content with their faith. Most of them only follow what's popular in society without filter it through Christian values. As a result, the culture they are practiced not much different from the culture of the world around them.

- 2) **Cultural Aversion:** For some Christians, culture is evil so it should be avoided. Culture dangerously threatens their Christian beliefs, morality, institutions (family, school, church). Culture is worldly, profane, then Christians should keep away from it. Some Christians choose to not involve in social media because they think the platform can bring negative impact, such as, gossip or immoral behavior. They believe that avoiding digital culture will protect them from the world's temptation and help them to keep focus on their faith.
- 3) **Cultural Trivialization:** Some Christians want distinctively cultural expression, but limit that to only popular forms and artifacts, like music, jewelry, t-shirts, and crafts. Culture is trivialized by narrowing the range of cultural forms, and by narrowing the spiritual themes. Then "Christian culture" have no significance at all. For example, to some Christians, Bible and spirituality books are the only legitimate forms of reading, they tend to avoid some literary works or novels that can explore Christian values through broader narratives. This limits their insight into how culture can reflect faith in ways that are more creative and relevant to everyday life.
- 4) **Cultural Accommodation:** Many Christians seem to regard culture as the duty of the faithful to make room in their beliefs and lifestyles for whatever new expressions of culture may appear. These Christians espouse a pluralistic and nonjudgmental approach to culture. Cultural preference is regarded only as a matter of personal choice. Unlike the Cultural Indifference approach who think very little about culture, this approach mirrors the culture of the day like using Paul's word, "*I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some*" (1 Cor. 9:22). This approach is different from cultural indifference, since people who follow this approach are more likely to align themselves with the current culture. For instance, many Christians use social media platforms such as Instagram or Tik Tok to share Bible verses and positive messages, even though they are often filled with popular culture trends that are not always in line with Christian teachings.
- 5) **Cultural Separation:** Proponents of this approach hold to a broad view of culture, but they promote and construct Christian alternatives to the existing culture, they build alternatives culture for their own use, like Christian schools, hospitals, sports leagues, residences, business world, radio and television, theme parks, internet provider with a "holy" search engine, et cetera – to be a safe haven to the community of believers. They do more than the trivializers and accommodationists, but they have very little influence beyond their Christian sphere or bubble. For example, in Indonesia there are several radio stations or television channels that broadcast programs that focus on Christian values, such as sermons, spiritual music, and discussions on the life of faith. While these stations are popular among Christians, their influence is limited and accessed more by the church community than the public.
- 6) **Cultural Triumphalism:** These Christians expect too much of culture. They believe that by raising and voting for Christian political candidates, or Christian laws, or Christian economic system, and so on – they are advancing the kingdom of God. The Shalom Kingdom full of righteousness, justice and peace will be upheld through a renewed Christian culture, rather than by the work of the Holy Spirit. This approach demands more than culture can give.

Moore argues that no one sticks to any of these six models exclusively, but we tend to hold many aspects of all these approaches in our everyday practice.

### **What's the Remedy**

This final point presupposes the saving grace of God through Jesus Christ crucified and risen, and the power, presence, and guidance of His Holy Spirit within His Church, His renewed image bearers. But in the discussion of our cultural identity, if we agree that one of the reasons for the weakness of our witness today is discrepancy of views and ignorance on the importance of culture matters, then my presentation today will come to its final end by inviting us, Christian scholars to revisiting culture matters, to reform our cultural identity and go hand in hand as the redeemed God's image bearers. Yes, this community, all Christian scholars must go hand in hand.

If Creation is the sanctuary and the body of Christ is commissioned to liturgical service in the cosmic sanctuary, then we must have the same word, the same heart, the same mind, the same spirit – as Paul wrote in his letter:

Complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus.

How then to educate God's people to live out Christian cultural identity faithfully? Christians can consider return to basic truths as the first steps of our cultural engagement as follows:

1. Keep abide in Christ, for without Christ, the creative-life-giving Word of God, we can do nothing.
2. Have integrity, sincerity, and purity in the cultural engagement – for this generation longs for these qualities.
3. Build strong networks in our academic or cultural fields.
4. Master our specific academic field best, as our vocation, be fishers of men there.
5. Keep both the Gospel Mandate and Cultural Mandate – as two mandates that can be distinguished but cannot be separated, because they come from the One and same God – then both mandates must be fully obeyed passionately and creatively.

Finally, much more complete, in-depth, and incisive proposal are needed on this topic. This article aims to be an initial impetus for readers to rethink the importance of Christian involvement in art and culture. Further discussions and writings are needed to continue to develop this topic and respond to the needs of Christianity and God's calling. As final encouragement, let us bring back every culture and everything to the throne and for the glory of our faithful Redeemer Lord, Jesus Christ!

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