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HOW SHOULD A CHRISTIAN
RELATE TO CULTURE?

by Charles Colson

One writer in a psychological journal pondered what makes humans distinct from beasts. After discarding several possibilities—tool usage, language, ability to think—the author concluded that humans seem to be the only creatures who care about what makes them distinct.

On the surface, the outstanding trait of humanity is culture. Not everyone agrees. Some claim beasts have cultures: chimpanzees “harvest” termites with a “tool”—a stripped tree branch wrought by their own hands; termites cultivate mushrooms for consumption; birds create species-specific nests; whales sing. But such simple, largely instinctive practices (which neither change nor improve over time) hardly compare with humankind’s achievements. Beasts haven’t any arts or technologies, scientific institutes or historical archives, philosophers or physicians. Apparently culture is a distinguishing mark of humankind.

But what makes humans creatures of culture? Why has every recorded human

society—however primitive—indulged a level of culture beyond anything beasts might produce? Whence this penchant for culture?

Scripture teaches that humanity’s attachment to culture derives from two sources. First is *the image of God*. Humans aren’t like beasts; we’ve been created in the image and likeness of God ([Gn 1:26–28](#)). We have a spiritual essence, being made for conscious communion with our Creator. God himself is a being of culture. He communes within himself in his triune being ([Gn 1:26](#); [Jn 17:5](#)); He fashioned a universe of great wonder and diversity ([Gn 1:1](#); [Jn 1:1–3](#)); and he continues to sustain that universe in exhaustive detail ([Col 1:17](#); [Heb 1:3](#)). It shouldn’t surprise us that a creature made in the likeness of such a God would be drawn toward cultural activities as well.

Second, humans have a *mandate* for culture, which, along with other works of God’s law, is written on every human heart ([Rm 2:14–15](#)). God has created people to exercise dominion over other creatures ([Gn 1:26–30](#))—the “cultural mandate.” Rather than giving a license to tyranny and plunder, God intends that humans exercise the kind of responsible stewardship that allows for creatures to realize full potential and for God’s goodness, beauty, and truth to flourish. In the process of carrying out this mandate, people create culture—language for communication;

families for love and nurture; agriculture for sustenance; resource development for tools and pleasures; governments for social order; procedures, protocols, and practices; things useful and things beautiful—all part of our in-built, God-given drive to order our world and develop the beauty and potential of our environment.

Humans are made to employ hearts, minds, and hands in the creation, maintenance, and propagation of those artifacts, institutions, and conventions by which we define, sustain, and enrich our lives. Culture can be a rich means of bringing honor and glory to God, as God himself knew in providing a specific and glorious design for his tabernacle and temple; as the psalmists showed in their skillful use of poetry and song; as Solomon demonstrated in government and public works to the astonishment of the world; and as Jesus showed through his powerful use of storytelling.

No human can be indifferent to culture. The key question for the disciple isn't *whether* to be involved in culture but *how*. Since Christ has been exalted as Lord, all culture must be put to use in a way that serves his interests and promotes his glory. Even down to the mundane details of table manners—"eating and drinking," [p 1437](#) we might say (1Co 10:31)—all of culture is to be engaged and used for God's glory. The Christian church's heritage includes a vast repository of cultural

firsts (hospitals, universities, musical notation); signal achievements (the music of Bach, the paintings of Rembrandt, the poetry of Hopkins); and everyday delights (hymns, books, inspiring stories). Such artifacts, institutions, and conventions—the stuff of culture—are the fruit of patient, deliberate labors of faithful believers who, understanding their duty as image bearers of God, and submitting to their Lord's cultural mandate, point the way for the rest of us to follow obediently in the path of culture to God's glory.

Does Scripture call us to engage culture? It certainly does. How can we ignore Scripture—the most significant cultural artifact in all of human history? And as God's image bearers, how can we ignore the calling to take every thought captive and offer all that we are and have to God's service and glory ([Rm 12:1–2](#); [2Co 10:3–5](#))?