

# The Christian and Culture

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How do Christians live in an ungodly culture; and what is God's purpose in human culture? My subject for this evening is, as was announced, 'The Christian and Culture.' The subject was suggested to me from more than one side. First, it was brought to my attention through a Men's Society of one of our churches. They had been discussing the subject of 'Religion and Culture.' But, as may readily be surmised, they found the matter rather too difficult for them to handle, and could reach no satisfactory solution. They sought outside aid and appealed to the editor of our *Standard Bearer*. Three questions they asked: Will you please give us a definition of culture? What is the attitude of the historic churches toward culture? What is the proper relationship between religion and culture? Some time before these questions were sent to me, however, it was suggested that the same men's society might invite me to lecture on the subject. As I really preferred the lecture form, I decided to wait until the opportunity would be offered, rather than answer the questions in our paper. Then, not long ago, our own young people invited me to give them an after-recess talk. The party that brought me the invitation mentioned a subject that is already related to the general topic of 'religion and culture.' I, then, decided to give a talk on what is the subject of my lecture.

Besides, in a general way the subject was suggested to me more than once. It is an important subject, one that ought to be of interest to us especially because it is intimately connected with the question of 'common grace.' In the background of my subject lie the problems concerning 'nature and grace,' 'nature and sin,' 'sin and grace.' And these subjects are being busily discussed, both here and in the Netherlands, by Reformed theologians.

Nor are they purely abstract problems with the attempt at solution of which the philosopher and theologian may enjoy themselves. They are of great practical significance, especially in our own day. For the correct answer to them it is necessary to determine the proper position of the Christian in the modern world. Difficult, therefore, though the subject must be, I could not refuse, when finally the invitation came to me to reproduce my after-recess talk in lecture form. I propose to call your attention to:

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- I. Culture as Such
- II. Culture and Sin
- III. Culture and Grace

### I. CULTURE AS SUCH

First of all, I wish to make a remark about the formulation of my subject. You will have noticed that I do not speak on 'religion and culture,' but definitely on 'the Christian and culture.' Intentionally I preferred

this formulation. Dr. Abraham Kuyper would, no doubt, have preferred to speak on 'Calvinism and Culture.' He discussed a phase of this subject in one of his *Stone-lectures*, the one on 'Calvinism and Art.' And many enthusiastic Calvinists of today would, undoubtedly, follow his example. Dr. Bavinck devoted one of his *Stone-lectures* to the subject: 'Revelation and Culture.' And many of us remember that about two decades ago a magazine was published that bore the name 'Religion and Culture.' But here I prefer the formulation, 'The Christian and Culture.' In the first place, this has the advantage of making my subject more concrete and definite. Religion is a very broad term. It may mean many things, especially in our modern day. The same is true of Calvinism. One cannot help but wonder what Calvin would say, could he take cognizance of what is presented as principally his world-and-life view. Certainly I cannot agree with Dr. A. Kuyper, when he assures us that "scientifically speaking, Calvinism means the completed evolution of Protestantism, resulting in a both higher and richer stage of human development' (*Calvinism*, p. 46). And, therefore, I rather avoid this term tonight, and choose a term that is definite and with which we are all acquainted. Besides I intend to approach the subject from a practical viewpoint, expressed in the question: What is the proper attitude of the Christian over against modern culture? 'The Christian and Culture' it, therefore, will be.

In modern parlance the term 'culture' has a very wide connotation. Originally this was not the case. The word is derived from the Latin word *colere*, which signifies 'to till,' 'to cultivate.' In its original and simplest meaning it denotes the labour that is bestowed upon the soil to prepare it for the seed and for the raising of crops. The idea, though not the word, is found in Scripture in [Genesis 2:15](#), where we read that God placed man in the garden of Eden to 'dress' it and to keep it. The original Hebrew word that is translated 'to dress' literally signifies 'to work,' 'to belabour' the ground. The Dutch used the word 'bebouwen.' The German translates: 'Das er ihn baute.' And the French renders 'pour le cultiver,' i.e., to cultivate it. In this simplest sense the word is still presented in our English word 'agriculture,' the culture of the field.

But today the word has no longer this limited signification. Since the eighteenth century it acquired a much wider meaning. It may be said to denote any human labour that is bestowed on the world in its widest sense, including man himself, for the purpose of refining, improving and elevating human life in the world to a higher level. It is in this wide sense that we employ the term in our lecture tonight. It denotes any and all human effort and labour bestowed on the *kosmos*, to bring to light and press into the service of man all the treasures and powers of that *kosmos*; and the labour bestowed on man himself as part of that world, to develop and enrich human life; and the products of this labour. Now, taken in this sense, the word 'culture' denotes a broad concept. It is as wide in its connotations as man with all his powers and talents, physical and mental, as the subject of culture, on the one hand; and as the world, including man himself, with all its energies and treasures, as the object and means of culture's labour, on the other hand.

It includes man, the whole man, as a physical being, related to the earth on which he lives and labours, even as he was taken out of the ground; his body, with its five senses of sight and hearing and smell and taste and touch, through which he stands in contact with the world about him, the world of his sensations and perceptions; and as a physical being, with intellect and will, his 'natural light' by which he may understand the world in which he lives, with its powers, possibilities, various relations, and himself in relation to that world; and as a religious and moral being, determining his relation to God and to his fellowmen. Culture takes in that whole man, not merely as an individual, but as member of the human organism and, therefore, in his various relationships to other men, and in the different

institutions that are thus called into existence: the institution of the home, the relation of marriage, of man and wife, of brother and sister, of parent and child; the institution of society, with such relations as those of capital and labour, employer and employee; the institution of the school, both higher and lower; the institutions of the economic world, with its commerce and industry and agriculture; the institution of government and all its implications. And it includes the entire earthly creation as the world in which man lives, whose creatures and powers and treasures are the capital with which man works, the means with which he labours, the treasures of the land and of the sea and of the air, the powers of the heavens above and of the depth of the earth, and all they contain.

The whole man, with all his powers and in all his relationships, belabours the whole *kosmos*. He works upon it with his mind and discovers its laws and relations, its motion and force, its hidden laws and treasures; and the culture of the natural sciences is the result, biology and physics, astronomy and chemistry, etc. He exerts his physical power and mental ingenuity upon that world, to subdue it and to press it into his service, in agriculture and mining, in navigation and aeronautics, in all the various modern industries and inventions. He cleaves the depth of the sea and soars through the height of the heavens; he chains the very lightning and rides on it; he knows how to swallow up distance and speaks to his neighbour a thousand miles away. All these belong to modern culture in the comprehensive sense of the term. Then, too, he discovers the laws of harmony and beauty, and gives expression to it in the culture of the fine arts; on the canvas and in the symphony, in sculpture and architecture he reproduces what his soul perceives and experiences of the beautiful in the world about him. And the same attention he devotes to himself. He examines his own physical organism, discovers its laws of operation, finds the causes of disease and death; and then sets himself the task of developing the powers and the form of that organism in physical culture, athletics and sports of various sorts; and to fight sickness and pain, corruption and death by the culture of the medical and surgical sciences and arts. He investigates the workings of his own soul, his sensations and perceptions, his imaginations and reason, his emotions and aesthetic feelings, and devotes himself to psychic culture, the development of intellect and will, and the building of moral character. And he studies the various relationships in human life, in the home, in the school, in society, and in the state, and develops the sciences of eugenics, pedagogy, sociology, economics, and politics, in order to set himself the task of improving and perfecting all these relations between individuals, groups, and nations. All these, and the products of these efforts must be regarded as belonging to what is known as modern culture.

And what may be the ultimate purpose modern culture has in view more or less consciously? Does it aim no higher, does it look toward no more distant and ultimate end than to supply human life with the modern conveniences with which we are all acquainted, and to furnish entertainment and amusement to modern man? This cannot be. Man must needs aim higher than this. The old Greeks already spoke of the beautiful soul in the beautiful body as the aim of human culture. And so modern culture, whether it is always conscious of this ultimate aim or not, cannot rest satisfied until it has attained to the perfect soul in the perfect body, the perfect man in the perfect society, in which all strife and disruption, war and unrest is found no more, from which suffering and even death are banished; and the perfect society in the perfect world, in which everything is subjected to man and serves him as its lord and sovereign! Such is the inevitable urge and purpose of modern culture!

## II. CULTURE AND SIN

For, after all, we should never forget that man is created with the cultural urge in him, and that he must needs be a cultural being. And before we consider our second question, viz., what is the effect of sin upon man as a cultural being, we must needs recall him to our mind as he was originally created. Here, let us remind ourselves, we differ principally and fundamentally from the modern philosopher, a difference that cannot but influence our evaluation of culture and its possibilities and aims. Our modern man of culture is an evolutionist. He will have nothing of the truth that man is a fallen sinner, and, therefore, knows nothing of a state of original righteousness and perfection in which man was created. To his conception all things as they are now appear to be in a normal state. Man's course of development through history was characterized by a constant and steady '*excelsior!*' Ever higher he climbs! Always he advances! The course may not be without its periodic setbacks. Principally it is, nevertheless, marked by steady progress and advancement in the right direction, i.e., in the direction of an ever greater perfection, physically, psychologically, and morally. And there seems to be no reason why he should not steadily continue on his upward course, until he has reached the goal: the perfect man in the perfect society in the perfect world! With this evolutionistic conception the Christian must needs differ fundamentally. His starting point is not a man on a very low level of development, but the perfect man as he received his being from the hands of his Creator. Scripture begins with a perfect soul, in a perfect body, in a perfect creation, perfect not in the sense of eternal immortality and incorruption, for man was made lapsible, but, nevertheless, in the sense that nowhere in all creation was there any imperfection, physical or moral. And to see modern culture in the proper light, we must needs look at man as God originally had formed him out of the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life.

For our present purpose it is sufficient to remind ourselves that man was made after the image of God, in spiritual perfection, in true knowledge of God, righteousness, and holiness; that, therefore, he stood in covenant relation of friendship to his Creator, His friend-servant, to love Him with all his heart and mind and soul and strength. This was above all his mandate. His name was 'servant.'

But we must, at the same time, remember that he was made lord over all the earthly creation. God gave him dominion over the beasts of the field, over the fowls of the air and over the fish of the sea. And God gave him the cultural mandate to multiply and replenish the earth. Man was, therefore, king of the world through the Word of God that was spoken to him. He must needs subject all things unto himself. For, this Word of God that was spoken to him, was not a mere command he might regard or disregard, a word the fulfillment of which depended upon his own will. On the contrary it was a divine Word of power. It entered into his very being, into his flesh and blood, into his bones and marrow, into the very depths of his soul. By it he was placed in a relation of authority and power over the world, which he could neither ignore nor destroy. The cultural urge, the urge to subdue the world to himself, was created in him. He must needs work. He must needs belabor that creation over which he had been set as lord, he must needs multiply and replenish the earth. Thus I would explain the 'cultural urge' in man throughout history.

But this 'cultural mandate,' from which man can never rid himself must not be divorced from his covenant-relation to God, and his mandate to love the Lord his God with all his heart and mind and soul and strength. He was God's officebearer: His prophet to know and to glorify Him in the midst of,

and through the means of, all the earthly creation; His priest to consecrate himself and all things to the living God in love; and His vice-regent, king, but under God, to reign, yes, but in His name and according to His will and to His glory. It must be his meat to do the will of God. All things were subject to him, to be sure, but merely in order that all his powers and gifts, and all the powers and treasures of the earthly creation might serve him as capital wherewith to serve his Creator. He must, therefore multiply and replenish the earth, cultivate the world in which he was placed, 'dress the garden,' in order that he might be the true servant of God, obeying in true love and covenant-friendship, and consecrating all things to His glory!

Such was man's original state. His was the 'can' and the 'will' and the 'may' as well as the 'must.' But man fell. And to evaluate modern culture we must surely try to find the correct answer to the question: what is the effect of sin upon man and upon the world, upon the subject and object of culture?

In answer to this question we must remark, first of all, that sin did not and could not change man *essentially*. It is absurd to say that except for the influence of 'common grace' man would have changed into a devil. Sin is ethical, moral in nature and could not change the essence of man. Neither did it change man's essential relation to the world about him, and deprive him of what we called a moment ago his 'cultural urge.' For His own eternal purpose, God by His omnipresent power preserved all things, and essentially they remained as He had created them. Man, therefore, remained lord of the earthly creation. The increased urge to multiply and replenish the earth, to develop creation and subdue all things unto himself, still moved him. It is true, he lost much of his original power and light. Only remnants of natural light has he left. But even so, his relation to the world remained essentially the same. He is still a 'cultural' being.

But his relation to God was changed. His disobedience made him guilty and worthy of death, the object of the wrath of God. And even as God had spoken, so he died on the very day that he ate of the forbidden fruit. He died spiritually. The image of God in him was changed into the very opposite. His light became darkness, and he loved the lie; his righteousness was turned into unrighteousness, he became rebellious, obdurate, and an enemy of God; his holiness was changed into impurity in all his affections. He became a slave of sin. The result is that he no longer may be God's officebearer. He cannot, he will not, he cannot will, and he may not stand in the service of the Most High. He still works. He still multiplies and replenishes the earth. He still employs his natural light to discover the laws of the world in which he lives. He still belabours the earthly creation and himself and strives to reach the end of perfect development with all his ingenuity and power, but he does so in enmity against God, as the servant of his father the devil.

Then, too, we must not overlook the important fact that the curse of God is on the world and that man is subject to corruption and death. In discussing the subject of modern culture this is too often ignored. The possibility of 'culture' is frequently deduced from paradise and the original state of righteousness and perfection, as if the terrible fact of the curse upon creation and of death, even in the natural, physical sense of the word, need not enter into the discussion. This, however, is a fundamental error. The ground is cursed, and the creature is in the bondage of corruption and made subject to vanity. The result is that creation gets nowhere. Vanity of vanities, all is vanity, saith the preacher. The creature is like a horse in a treadmill. It labours and toils all the day long, without accomplishing anything. It is the 'vicious circle.' There is never anything new under the sun. And man himself is not only spiritually and

ethically corrupt, but he is also subject to corruption and death. Death is in all his life. And from that death he can never deliver himself. From every side he is limited. The work he performs he does as in a death cell. He only awaits his execution.

Now, if we take all these important factors into consideration, what must be our conclusion with regard to modern culture, culture as practiced by the natural man, outside of Christ?

In the first place, it will have become evident, not only that also the natural man is able to cultivate the world and himself, but that he must needs do so. He is very much limited because of the loss of his original powers. He has only a remnant of natural light. But even so, to a limited extent, he is able to work upon and with the present creation, discover the laws of God in that world, and subject all things unto himself. Also the ungodly multiplies and replenishes the earth, develops all the relations inherent in the human race, forms the family, builds society, seeks to develop the State. He is busy in science and art, in commerce and industry, in agriculture, physical culture, psychic culture, and character building. And in as far as he understands that to adapt his life to these ordinances of God in creation is good for him and for the race, he sometimes succeeds in his efforts. He can build a tolerably good house, compose a beautiful piece of music, raise a good crop, keep himself within the limits of an outwardly decent life to a certain extent. He can measure the stars, analyze matter, discover the laws of the universe and use them, fly through space, cleave the depth of the sea, conquer all distances, and produce all the wonders of modern science, industry, and art which we use every day. And no one will take the attitude of condemning these productions of modern culture as such. Nature and grace form no antithesis.

In the second place, however, it must also be evident to anyone that understands the Word of God and views the present world in its light, that with all his culture the natural man never can do good. He always sins, for the simple reason that he stands in enmity against God and refuses to love, serve, and glorify Him with the products of modern culture. He aims at himself. And because of this the ethical contents of the products of modern culture are certainly corrupt. There are certain branches of culture that may be considered to lie at the periphery from this viewpoint. The spiritual-ethical attitude of man hardly comes to manifestation and expression in them. This is true, for instance, in the so-called exact sciences. That the square of the hypotenuse of a rectangular triangle is equal to the sum of the squares of its sides is a mathematical truth, in the discovery and application of which man's ethical nature does not come to manifestation. But the closer we approach to those branches and departments of modern culture in which man's ethical nature finds expression, the more it becomes evident that modern culture is corrupt. The radio is good, but what comes over the radio is a different matter. The cinematograph is a gift of God, but the vaudeville is, nevertheless, corrupt. A musical production may be formally beautiful, yet its contents may be devoted to Venus or Bacchus. And, besides, always the natural man seeks himself and his own glory. And thus he produces 'the world,' with its lust of the flesh, its lust of the eyes, and its pride of life. And with the products of modern culture he accomplishes his own destruction in the ultimate sense of the word. He destroys the family, disrupts society, corrupts the state, sets the world afire with the torch of war.

And, in the third place, it must also have become evident, that in the ideal and ultimate sense of the word culture is impossible. There is no culture in the sense that man approximates the aim of the perfect man in the perfect society in the perfect world. Man can build nothing, for the simple reason that he has no material to build with. He cannot reconstruct the perfect world that was before the fall; neither can he construct the world that is to come: the kingdom of God is not established by the

cultural efforts of man. This incompetence must be asserted of all culture whether in the domain of science and art, or in that of agriculture and industry, or of philosophy and invention. Art cannot imagine the perfect world; science cannot discover it; the power of man cannot build it. Also in this respect I must disagree with Dr. A. Kuyper, who describes the purpose and function of art in his lecture on 'Calvinism and Art' as follows:

But if you confess that the world *was* beautiful, but by the curse has become *undone*, and by a final catastrophe is to pass to its full state of glory, excelling even the beautiful of paradise, then art has the mystical task of reminding us in its productions of the beautiful that was lost and of anticipating its perfect coming luster. Now this last-mentioned instance is the Calvinistic confession. It realized, more clearly than Rome, the hideous, corrupting influence of sin; this led to a higher estimation of the nature of paradise in the beauty of original righteousness; and guided by this enchanting remembrance, Calvinism prophesied a redemption of outward nature also, to be realized in the reign of celestial glory. From this standpoint Calvinism honoured art as a gift of the Holy Ghost and as a consolation in our present life, enabling us to discover in and behind this sinful life a richer and more glorious background. Standing by the ruins of this once so wonderfully beautiful creation, art points out to the Calvinist both the still visible lines of the original plan, and what is even more, the splendid restoration by which the supreme Artist and Master-Builder will one day renew and enhance even the beauty of His original creation (*Calvinism*, pp.208, 209).

Flighty words and high sounding phrases I consider these words of Dr. Kuyper, that are rather the expression of unrestrained imagination than of historical truth and sober thought. It is quite impossible for the artist to reconstruct the original world of perfection. What painter, for instance, could ever produce a picture of man in his first state, without sin and suffering and death, in righteousness and holiness and truth, with his original power and royal majesty in the midst of creation? The little halo that is painted around the head of some saints in old paintings is a confession of the artist's incompetence to produce on his canvas a true representation of a righteous man. Neither original righteousness nor regeneration and its life of perfection can be put on the canvas. And the perfect world that is to come can so little be construed by art that even Scripture always speaks of that world in earthly terms. It belongs to those things which 'eye hath not seen, ear had not heard, and never arose in the heart of man.' And what is true of art is true of science and of culture in general. It must needs move within the scope of the vicious circle of corruption and death, of the curse and vanity. Culture cannot make the perfect man, nor build the perfect world. The end of all culture is pointed out in the number six hundred and sixty-six of Revelation 13, the number of man, of Antichrist, the number that denotes the limit of all earthly efforts and strife, the vicious circle, the week without the Sabbath, toil without rest, strife without attainment, time without eternity. Vanity of vanities, saith the preacher, all is vanity!

### III. CULTURE AND GRACE

I do not have to call special attention to the patent fact, that grace does not change this situation as long as we are in this world. The Christian lives in the same world as the ungodly, and he must work with the same material. Even as sin could not and did not fundamentally and essentially change the world, so grace does not renew and regenerate it. What is changed in the Christian is his heart. In Christ Jesus he is a new creature; old things have passed away, behold all things have become new, II

Corinthians 5:17. His state is changed, for Christ died and rose in his behalf and he is righteous by faith before God. And his spiritual ethical relation to God is radically turned about, so that he in principle now loves the Lord his God with all his heart and mind and soul and strength. Besides, it must not be forgotten that this new life is not only fundamentally the opposite of the life of sin, it is also from above, not of the earth, but heavenly. The Christian therefore is not of this world, though he be in the world. But this is true only in spiritual principle and through faith in Christ Jesus. All other things remain the same. The Christian, as long as he is in this world, still has his old nature, in which are the motions of sin, and that is subject to death and corruption. And who can see that there is any difference between the righteous and the unrighteous? The grave is the earthly end of them both. Both are subject to the same vanity. And the Christian lives and moves and labors in the same old world, upon which rests the curse of God and that is in the bondage of corruption. And he also must work with the materials at hand. He does not go out of the world. There is no antithesis between nature and grace, even though we remember that 'nature' bears the curse and is in the bondage of corruption. The Christian separates himself from no department of life. According to the gifts bestowed on him he also is busy in science and art, in commerce and industry, and makes use of all the means and institutions of this present world, in the home, in society, in the State, as well as in the church. In this formal sense of the word it would be as absurd to speak of a specific Christian culture as it would be to speak of Christian digestive organs, Christian octaves in music, Christian organs and pianos, Christian colors and perspectives in painting, Christian equations or triangles in mathematics, etc. In the same world and with the same means does the Christian live and work with the ungodly.

And yet there is a difference. The antithesis is very real. But it is of a spiritual-ethical nature. It is the antithesis of sin and grace. In every department of life the Christian lives from the principle of regeneration by faith, from the fear of the Lord, which is the beginning of all wisdom, and according to the Word of God, revealed to us in the Holy Scriptures. What this means should be perfectly evident in the light of what we have discussed thus far. It means that his calling is in this present world to represent the cause of the Son of God always and everywhere, in the family and in the school, in society and in the State, in the laboratory and in the shop. Concretely it means, first of all, that in all things he seeks not the glory of Man, but the glory of God in Christ. His glory he seeks in the sciences and in the arts, in industry and agriculture. His will he seeks to do, of His righteousness he speaks in the midst of sin, of His grace in the midst of wrath and curse and vanity and death. It means, too, that by his culture he does not seek or produce 'the world.' He does not press all things in the service of sin and unrighteousness, but with all things he seeks the Kingdom of God. He does not produce nor have fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, the pride of life, as manifest in vain philosophy, evolutionistic science, carnal literature, moving pictures, shows, songs, operas, or symphonies. He does not destroy the family by such institutions of man as divorce and birth control, He does not believe in the strife of hatred in the social relations of man to man or group to group, or in the relation of nation to nation. He stands for the love of God in Christ and is truly a peace-maker by faith in Him. In this spiritual-ethical sense of the word he lives his own life, antithetically over against the life of sin and of the flesh, and he condemns the world. He strives for a Christian family, a Christian home, a Christian life in society, a Christian school, a Christian university, a Christian state, and is a living member of the Christian church. In a word, his calling is, not to wed Jerusalem to Athens, but to represent the cause of God's covenant, the cause of the Son of God in the midst of the world! The antithesis is that of sin and grace.



Finally, in the light of what has been said, it will also be evident, that it cannot be the calling even of the Christian to make this world better. No more than the natural man can the Christian by 'Christian culture' attain to the ideal of the perfect soul in the perfect world. For, he also lives in the body of this death and with all his earthly life is subject to corruption; and also for him all earthly things are vanity. Just because a man is a Christian doctor and surgeon, he cannot save his patient from disease and death. He cannot escape the 'vicious circle' by cultural efforts. But he strives to make all things subservient to the kingdom of God. When he multiplies and replenishes the world, for instance, he is well aware of the fact, that he brings forth children unto death in this world; but he lives by faith and knows that in Christ he labours and suffers to bring forth the perfect church, the multitude which no man can number, that will be revealed in all their glory in the New Jerusalem. And thus he looks forward in hope. Though maintaining that all the efforts of man cannot bring the perfect world, his view is not that of the pessimist, neither of the Epicurean whose slogan is: 'Let us eat and drink for tomorrow we die.' For, in Christ Jesus he looks forward in a sure hope to the perfect world, with a perfect culture, through the final wonder of grace at the appearing of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God from heaven. For, then, the creature shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption, all things will be made new, and the tabernacle of God will be with men forever.