

MATRIX OF MEANING: FIVE THESES ON CHRISTIANITY AND CULTURE

Donald Williams on the Relationship
between Human Nature and Creativity

The question of the proper relationship of the church to human culture cannot be avoided.

1. **Human beings are creative because they are made in the image of the Creator.** (We were made in God's image so that we could not only have fellowship with Him but so we would be qualified to represent Him as His sub-regents and stewards on earth.)
2. **Culture is the material, social, and symbolic matrix that results from the full range of mankind's creative activity.** (It includes business, carpentry, farming, and cooking as well as art, music, drama, and literature; all are seamless products of human creativity.)
3. **Culture is not and cannot be spiritually neutral or irrelevant.** (It flows from the very

heart of human identity as a creature made in the image of God to serve Him as stewards of His earth — or from our rebellion against that identity.)

4. **Francis Schaeffer was right to insist that part of Christian discipleship is living out “the Lordship of Christ over the total culture.”** (Salvation is not just a religious “experience”; it restores us to our role as sub-creators for God’s glory.)
5. **The Christian subculture in any society should bring salt and light to that society through its own cultural activity, both in creating and consuming culture.** (From homemaking to gardening to labor to art and music, the quality of our lives should reflect who we are.)

Introduction:

The Christian church was born out of an ancient Semitic culture into a pagan culture and has survived into a secularist and neo-pagan one in the West while expanding into every kind of cultural milieu imaginable across the planet. In the meantime it has been a major player in creating and molding culture, especially Western culture, and

has had its influence on whatever culture it has entered. But the situation is complicated in that the influence unavoidably goes both ways. It is not always easy to discern what in contemporary Christendom represents universal and non-negotiable truths revealed by God and what reflects the culture into which those truths have to be incarnated. Another important question: When is that inevitable cultural flavoring a necessary and even positive reflection of the fact that the church has successfully indigenized itself incarnationally, and when is it a corruption of its basic principles?

We have not always done a good job of discerning the answers to such questions. Most people can see that nineteenth-century missionaries should not have automatically tried to get tribesmen to wear Western clothes or switch to Western styles of music. It is not hard to see that American Evangelicalism has been perhaps a bit too much influenced by American pragmatism and consumerism. But where do you draw the line? Not all cultural influence is mere imperialism by the Western church or a corruption of it by pagan or secularist values. Surely the Auca Indians are better off not to have a culture based on vendetta any longer; that is a direct impact of their conversion to

Christianity on their culture.¹ And surely current Christians should not wish to jettison Handel's *Messiah* because it uses musical techniques that were developed for the secular opera. (There were some Christians who protested it when it was first performed because they thought it impious to have the Gospel sung in a secular concert hall instead of a church.² They probably would have had a problem with Jesus preaching out on a hillside instead of in the synagogue, if the Sermon on the Mount were not already part of Scripture.)

Figuring out how the church should relate to culture and how it should seek to influence culture without being corrupted by it — figuring out how practically, in other words, for it to be in the world but not of it — is not an easy task. It includes, but is not limited to, how the church should relate to media and the arts. I think American Evangelicals need to do a better job of it and that no Reformation of that movement can be whole and wholesome otherwise. It will be easier if we can come to a theological understanding of what culture is and lay

¹ For more on this story, see Elisabeth Elliot, *Through Gates of Splendor* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale Momentum, 1981).

² Thomas E. Kaiser, "Handel's Messiah: Sacred or Profane?" *Praeclara*, accessed February 22, 2021, https://www.praeclara.org/?page_id=641.

down some basic principles that govern our unavoidable participation in it. That will be the task of these five theses.³

THESIS 1: HUMAN BEINGS ARE CREATIVE BECAUSE THEY ARE MADE IN THE IMAGE OF THE CREATOR.

Why does human culture exist? Why is it different in different places? Why does it have variations even in the same place? My ninth-grade history teacher defined culture as “the learned behavior of man, as he has adapted himself to his total environment.” By that definition, every species has a “culture.” But all robins make the same style

³ The foundations for the understanding of culture proposed here are in J.R.R. Tolkien, “On Fairy Stories,” *The Tolkien Reader* (N.Y. Ballantine, 1966), 3-84), and Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Mind of the Maker* (N.Y.: Harper and Row, 1968). The place to start for understanding a biblical relationship between Christianity and Culture is Francis Schaeffer’s “cultural apologetic,” laid out in *The God Who is There* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1968). Other important works wrestling with issues of Christianity and culture include Abraham Kuypers, *Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1931), H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (N.Y.: Harper and Row, 1951), Henry R. Van Til, *The Calvinistic Concept of Culture* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1959), Francis Schaeffer, *Art and the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL.: InterVarsity, 1973), Leland Ryken, *Culture in Christian Perspective* (Portland: Multnomah, 1986), Andy Crouch, *Culture Making: Recovering our Creative Calling* (Downers Grove, IL.: InterVarsity, 2008), and Donald T. Williams, *Deeper Magic: The Theology Behind the Writings of C. S. Lewis* (Baltimore: Square Halo Books, 2016), pp. 201-14. A very helpful practical approach to realizing Christian culture on a personal level is Edith Schaeffer, *Hidden Art* (Wheaton, Tyndale, 1971).

and design of nest, while human beings live in caves, tents, houses, and other structures — and even the houses have an almost infinite variety of designs: log cabin, cottage, shot-house, ranch, Cape Cod, Victorian, neo-classical, Tudor half-timbered, with multiple variations on each of those styles. And while the secular mind emphasizes the continuity — we both build shelters — if a robin started really acting like a human being — making a hundred different styles of nest and, more significantly, making stick and clay statues of famous robins and decorating its nest with them — we should find him, as Chesterton says, a fearful wildfowl indeed.⁴ What is the difference?

Human beings are creative in a way that transcends anything we see in the animal world. We do not, like animals, do things out of instinct and hence do them all the same way. And we do things they don't do at all. Cavemen drew pictures of reindeer on the walls of their caves. We have not found any deer drawing pictures of men. It is more than just a matter of intelligence. A monkey might break off a stick to use as a tool for digging termites

⁴ G.K. Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man* (N.Y.: Dodd, Meade, 1925), 22. See this book for a fascinating analysis of why human beings differ from animals in this way; cf. Donald T. Williams, *Mere Humanity* (Chillicothe, OH: DeWard, 2018), for more on Chesterton's apologetic.

out of a hill; he might arrange boxes into a pile he can climb to retrieve a banana hung from the ceiling. He surely shows a certain rudimentary intelligence in doing so. But he will not arrange the sticks or the boxes into a symmetrical pattern just so he can sit back and contemplate it, while getting no termites or bananas out of them at all. Birds sing (all the same tune) to look for a mate or mark their territory. “This is my tree! Go find your own!” They do not gather in flocks to listen to a particularly good warbler just because he sounds so cool. So, as Chesterton rightly and aptly concludes, “Art is the signature of man.”⁵

It is understandable then that people often confuse culture with the arts. The arts are, in fact, a salient manifestation of human nature and hence of human culture. We are the only species that has art that exists only for contemplation and enjoyment and has no obvious pragmatic purpose. But it is the same creativity that makes us artists that also makes us unique as a species in science, in agriculture, in industry, in architecture, in homemaking, in politics — all areas in which individual and corporate human creativity generates the kind of world in which we live and affects the way we live in it. Creativity and the

⁵ Chesterton, *Everlasting Man*, op. cit., 16.

culture it generates are central to who we are. In a sense, that is what makes us Man.

This radical discontinuity between us and the rest of the animal kingdom demands an explanation, and evolution is not capable of providing it. I am not going to enter into the controversy over precisely how much biological evolution contributed to the origin of our species except to observe that, while it clearly played some role, it cannot be the whole story. With all the physical continuity we have with other animals, we are not in the sum total of our nature just an incremental step further down the same road as them, but rather represent a right turn and a quantum leap. There is only one adequate explanation for that leap that I have ever seen, and Christians are privileged to have it in their possession — a tremendous advantage if they want to understand and properly relate to human culture. It is in the biblical doctrine of creation, particularly as elaborated by J.R.R. Tolkien in his concept of “sub-creation”: we are creative because we were made in the image of the Creator.⁶ God’s “primary creation”

⁶ Tolkien, “On Fairy Stories,” op. cit. For further analysis of Tolkien’s idea and how it relates to the biblical worldview, see Donald T. Williams, *Mere Humanity*, op. cit., esp. chp. 3, and also his *An Encouraging Thought: The Christian Worldview in the Writings of*

(the universe and us, in His image) leads to our “secondary creation” — of literature and art and music, but first of language itself, and then also of homes and furniture and meals and tools and cities. We, through our God-given creative impulses and energy, were designed to assist Him in bringing His creation to its full potential, to completeness and fruition — not because He needed assistance, but because, in His own creativity and personality, He desired graciously to share with us the joy of making the world. We were to fill the world (with our progeny and also the products of our labor), to subdue it, and to rule it on His behalf (Gen. 1:28). Theologians call this “the cultural mandate.”

The creation of culture then is fulfilling to us because it is the expression of our God-given identity: it is who we are. Unfortunately, we rebelled against God in the Garden. As a result, we still rule the world, but for ourselves rather than for Him, and hence often rather badly. But masters of the earth we are still, or try to be, though by its thorns and thistles it does not cooperate with our rule as well as it once might have. Human culture then reflects human identity. We are created in the image of God

J.R.R. Tolkien (Cambridge, OH: Christian Publishing House, 2018), esp. chp. 2.

but fallen, hence both magnificent and wretched, totally depraved in terms of our ability to merit salvation through our own works and yet still retaining the ruins of our original goodness.⁷ We still do much that is good (in a temporal, not in a spiritual or salvific sense) because the remnants of our original goodness still inhere in us and because of common grace.⁸ But we also do much that is foolish or downright evil. As a result, human cultures, like human beings, are complex mixtures of good and evil. Culture cannot be simply rejected — we could not live without it — but neither can it be uncritically embraced. This applies to all cultures, though some may be more corrupt or more conducive to certain types of goods than others. This is what makes being “in the world but not of it” such a challenging proposition.⁹ But it is not a challenge that we have the option to shirk.

⁷ See Douglas Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011), chp. 18, for a fuller discussion of this point.

⁸ *Common Grace* is a theological term for the way God graciously restrains the full results of sin in human beings and in human societies so that we are not as evil as our Fall would otherwise have made us — He “sends His rain upon the just and the unjust” (Mt. 5:45). It is called *common* grace because all benefit from it, as distinguished from special grace, or saving grace, which applies only to believers in Christ.

⁹ John 17:14-16.

Two important conclusions follow from this understanding of the origins of culture. First, culture is significant. It is the central expression of our very identity, flowing from our unique status as created in the image of the Creator. That makes it important and powerful. But its power needs to be seen in the context of the second conclusion: cultural determinism is eliminated as a valid understanding of how we relate to culture. We cannot say that a person's culture *determines* how he will see the world and what he will do (despite many Post-Modernist analyses that imply that it does, if not stating so outright). Culture, and our "situatedness" in it, is indeed a powerful influence because it flows from the dynamic influence of human creativity. But precisely for that very same reason, we can never hide behind the mantra that, "My culture made me do it." We are the creators of culture and therefore are capable of standing above it. Many may not choose to do so; they may acquiesce in its influence as if it had created them. But if we create culture or, more accurately, participate in its creation, then it is ultimately subject to our judgment and susceptible to our free actions. Our feelings, beliefs, and acts are influenced by our culture but do not have to be bound by it. Our freedom as moral agents within culture then also

flows from the image of God. Creativity means the ability to do things that are not purely the result of antecedent circumstances and influences — the ability to contribute something actually new. We were created in the image of the Creator.

THESIS 2: CULTURE IS THE MATERIAL, SOCIAL, AND SYMBOLIC MATRIX THAT RESULTS FROM THE FULL RANGE OF MANKIND'S CREATIVE ACTIVITY.

Now we are in a position to give a working definition of culture. The word comes from a Latin root whose most basic meaning is planting, tilling, growing crops. A *cultor* is a planter; *cultura* is tilling; *cultus* means tilling, cultivation. It is for this reason that the very word *culture* is a part of the word *agriculture*. The picture is that of human effort, directed by human intelligence, being expended onto nature to produce a result that nature by herself would not have given us: stalks of wheat or grapevines or olive trees concentrated in ordered rows in a field and growing in a literally unnatural abundance (an abundance that nature unaided could not have produced), there for our convenience to the end that human beings and human society might flourish. The picture is very consistent with the biblical account of human beings. We are

creators, but sub-creators. Unlike God, we cannot bring something out of nothing. We have to depend on Him for some given (the natural world) to work with. But we bring forth from those natural raw materials results that nature by herself could not achieve: not primary creation, but real sub-creation. How long we lived as hunter-gatherers I do not know. But when agriculture emerged in human history, it emerged from the divinely imaged nature and creative potential that God had given us. So while the hunter-gatherers surely had culture (they made art and buried their dead with ceremony, for example), with agriculture a new level of culture became possible: what we call *civilization*.

Already in Latin the words *cultor*, *cultura*, and *cultus*, whose literal meanings we gave above, began very early to be used metaphorically to refer to the cultivation or development from their natural state into forms more beneficial (or harmful) to human beings of things other than crops: buildings, cities, arts, governments, religions, Man himself. Once this happens we are on the verge of the definition we would like to use here: *Culture is the material, social, and symbolic matrix that results from the full range of mankind's creative activity*. That is what we speak of today when we refer to a nation or a people or even a smaller group like a school, a church, or a business

(“corporate culture”) as having a culture. They have developed a way of doing things, making things, and relating to each other through that doing and making that characterizes their society. It is inherited but also constantly changing as their creative activity continues to have input, preserving, altering, improving, corrupting, sometimes even destroying that total way of being in the world. These culture-creating acts are largely unconscious, but sometimes are very conscious and deliberate. The resulting cultural matrix grows from the kind of creative activity that is characteristic of human beings because they were created in the image of the Creator. It includes but is not limited to what is sometimes called “high culture”: painting, sculpture, fiction, poetry, theater, cinema, music, dance. It includes religion, business, carpentry, farming, cooking, media, and education along with what we call the “fine” arts; it also includes science. All are seamless products of human creativity. You could say it is the mark we leave on each other as we leave our mark on the world.

Now here’s the point. We were created to do this. We have to do this. We don’t have the option not to participate. It is not a sin to do this. It would be a sin not to do this, if not doing it were possible. Sin or virtue, obedience or disobedience, lies in *the way* we

do it. Do we do it for God or for self? In accordance with and reflecting His revealed truth or in rebellion against and suppressing or distorting it? Submissive to His wisdom or insisting on our own folly? Sorting all that out is why we need three more theses.

THESIS 3. CULTURE IS NOT AND CANNOT BE SPIRITUALLY NEUTRAL OR IRRELEVANT.

Perhaps no one would *say* that culture is spiritually irrelevant. But many Evangelical Christians act as if they thought it were. They would think the idea of the church returning to its historic role as a patron, hence influencer, of the arts just silly. Meanwhile, they are entertained by music and sitcoms that undermine their biblical worldview and coarsen their manners, blissfully unaware that there is a problem with this. It does not help that the only alternative model they are aware of is the old Fundamentalist rejection of all “secular” culture as inherently evil and corrupting — for example, not using discernment but simply avoiding all public theater and popular music as part of “the world.” That was a failure of spiritual responsibility in cultural engagement, an approach just as inadequate as their own. They rejected it (or their parents did — they may not even remember it)

without putting any better model in its place. Their unthinking approach contributes greatly to their inability to be faithful to the content or practice of the faith they think they espouse.

Nevertheless, culture is not and cannot be spiritually neutral or irrelevant. It flows from the very heart of human identity as a creature made in the image of God to serve Him as stewards of His earth — or from our rebellion against that identity. Our relationship to culture is thus inevitably complicated. God supports culture because it nurtures His human creatures, who could not live without it. Even the worst and most corrupt cultures contain much that is good by common grace — which no doubt pleases Him. Nevertheless, God also stands in judgment over culture because it is the reflection not only of mankind’s identity as created in His image but also of its identity as a rebel against His service.

A seemingly confusing biblical metaphor reflects this dual nature of culture and thus creates a tension for God’s people in this complex world. Christians, His redeemed children, are to see themselves as strangers and exiles in such fallen cultures (Heb. 11:13, 1 Pet. 2:11), but they are also to follow in the steps of their Israelite forebears and “seek the welfare of the city where [they] have been

sent into exile and pray to the Lord on its behalf," be it Babylon, Nineveh, or Rome (Jer. 29:7). They are neither to identify with human culture nor to stand aloof from it. In other words, this dual role implies that they are to be participating in this foreign culture, not withdrawing from it; but at the same time they should not be finding their primary identity in it, yielding themselves to its influence uncritically, or allowing themselves to be defined by it. They are to be in it but not of it (John 17:14-15). To navigate this dual role successfully, they cannot have an intellectually lazy approach. The path of least resistance is not open to them. They must constantly be exercising *discernment*. That is why Reformation is needed in this area. We *are* intellectually lazy. It is easy to yield to culture; it is relatively easy to convince yourself that you have withdrawn from it. (You will not have, of course, not really.) On neither of those paths is there any spiritual integrity, salt and light, or credible witness to be found. Where are these things found?

Somehow we must be "in" the world and "not of" it at the same time; somehow we must achieve the integration of these two prepositions in one unified lifestyle that becomes the mark of *Christian* culture. But that is difficult. What we often attempt is the much easier task of taking one of these prepositions

in isolation from the other. It requires no effort at all to be "in" the world; the path of least resistance will suffice to accomplish that most efficiently. And, while it requires more effort, it is also possible to be "not of" the world, up to a point. Here we create our (partially) insulated parallel universe, with borders guarded by ever-increasing lists of Rules. "We don't cuss, drink, smoke, or chew, / And we don't go with girls that do." We create our own little Christian ghetto and withdraw within its borders so we will not be corrupted. We write our own music and books and create our own TV, all of which somehow turn out to be strangely cheap imitations of what the world is doing but without the grosser forms of immorality. But this is a false approach, and Christ makes it clear he does not mean us to take it. He does so both by his prayer in John 17:15 ("I do not ask You to take them out of the world, but to keep them from the evil one") and by his example, hanging out with publicans and sinners and scandalizing the religious conservatives of his day.

We can pursue either of these prepositions in the flesh. We do not have in ourselves either the wisdom or the strength to be "in" and "not of" at the same time. That requires the wisdom and the power of God; that requires discernment and dying to self. And so, of course, it is not to be thought of by half-

hearted Christians, and so it is seldom seen.

Yet that is precisely what is commanded: not isolated prepositions in the flesh, but the integration of the two prepositions in the Spirit. But how can we do that? Paul provides the answer; "Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence, and if anything worthy of praise, let your mind dwell on these things" (Phil. 4:8)

What kind of command is this verse? It is a Positive Command. It is about what we are positively supposed to have our minds dwell on. But in our application of it we have almost universally turned it into a negative command, about what we are not supposed to read, watch, or listen to: "Oh, this is impure, so I'd better stay away from it!" Why have we managed to be so inattentive to what the Text actually says? Because it is easier. It is easier to boycott all movies (or all movies of a certain rating) than to use discernment; it is easier to swear off of "secular" music or "rock" than to listen critically to what the world is actually saying through these media, understand with empathy the cries of its lost voices, but then choose the good and dwell on that.

I repeat: this verse says not one word about what we cannot read, watch, or listen to. It says not a

single word about what we must turn a blind eye to, pretend isn't there, or be ignorant of. It says a lot about what we should nourish and feed our minds on. Contrary to the T-shirt, Nietzsche isn't preachy; he is actually very preachy, and what he is preaching is straight from the Pit. But he has been very influential and he is important, and even in his evil he can teach us some things. Therefore, I was not disobeying this passage when I read him, even though he is rightly described by none of the adjectives (except possibly "excellent," in the sense of "outstanding") that the verse recommends. But that is not the kind of thing I feed my mind on constantly. What is? I read Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* twice in 1968, the year I discovered it, and have read it annually since as a way of cleaning out the garbage that has collected in my mind from grading freshman essays and reconnecting myself with the Good, the True, and with the Beautiful, with the contrast between Good and Evil, with the nature of the Quest, and the value and significance of Sacrifice.¹⁰ No work speaks more eloquently and powerfully to me of such things. More importantly,

¹⁰ See my book *An Encouraging Thought: The Christian Worldview in the Writings of J.R.R. Tolkien* (Cambridge, OH: Christian Publishing House, 2018) for more on these themes in *The Lord of the Rings*.

I am doing the same thing with Scripture on a daily basis. That is what the verse is talking about.

It is not that there is nothing that is so raw, so evil, so corrupting that we should not expose ourselves to it. There is much that falls in that category, and the increasing decadence of our society can render us appallingly naïve at discerning what it is. But our main strategy for dealing with these problems is too often negative while the Bible's is positive. Understanding this distinction makes Phil. 4:8 the answer to the dilemma raised by Jesus' words in John 17. How do we live "in" the world without becoming "of" it? We do it through a positive, pro-active program of feeding ourselves on the good. Do not focus primarily on what you cannot read, watch, or listen to. Do not use ignorance as the path to safety. Machen put it well: "Some of modern thought must be refuted. The rest must be made subservient. But nothing in it can be ignored."¹¹ Rather, the formula is this: Really feed your mind on the Good, True, and Beautiful, as defined by Scripture and exemplified in the best of the classical tradition, and then it will respond rightly to the rest.

¹¹J. Gresham Machen, *Education, Christianity, and the State* (Unicoi, Tn.: The Trinity Foundation, 1987), 57.

THESIS 4: FRANCIS SCHAEFFER WAS RIGHT TO INSIST THAT PART OF CHRISTIAN DISCIPLESHIP IS LIVING OUT “THE LORDSHIP OF CHRIST OVER THE TOTAL CULTURE.”

If human culture exists as the product of human creativity because human beings were created in the image of the Creator; if culture is the material, social, and symbolic matrix that results from the full range of mankind’s creative activity; if culture cannot then be spiritually neutral or irrelevant, so that we can neither ignore it, nor withdraw from it, nor let it influence us uncritically, but must rather engage it responsibly; and if Christ is supreme as Lord of all; then Francis Schaeffer was right to insist that part of Christian discipleship is living out “the Lordship of Christ over the whole of life,” which includes the totality of culture.¹² We have not understood adequately either the need for such living or the nature of what it asks of us.

When a more or less Judeo-Christian consensus was still dominant in American culture, it was easy

¹² “The Lordship of Christ over the whole of life means that there are no platonic areas in Christianity, no dichotomy or hierarchy between the body and the soul. . . . If Christianity is really true, then it involves the whole man, including his intellect and his creativeness.” Francis A. Schaeffer, *Art and the Bible*, op. cit., 7, 9.

for Evangelicals to think of their faith as something that they practiced on Sunday morning. The rest of the week they did not really need to be that different from their neighbors — maybe a little bit more honest and moral, and if they were Fundamentalists, abstaining from alcohol, tobacco, and movies — but otherwise, not radically different. Becoming a Christian or “getting saved” was something they did as part of their religious life. There was no expectation that it would make much difference in how they ran their businesses, how they voted, how they raised their families, or — unless they were Fundamentalists — what kind of recreation and entertainment they would enjoy. Their approach was inconsistent: they were neither consistently withdrawing from culture nor effectively engaging it. Some of them practiced an incoherent hodgepodge of both strategies. Mostly, they were drifting with the culture, which was headed to places that would shock and dismay them a generation later.

Our Evangelical forebears made two mistakes which they have unfortunately bequeathed to many of us. First, they seriously overestimated how deep the Christian influence on American culture was. Traditional morality and the traditional family were in the 1950s being maintained out of habit, while

any basis for those things in spiritual or even cultural commitment to their foundations was being hollowed out. Our failure to practice the Great Commission as it was given — to make *disciples* rather than merely converts — meant that the foundations of our Judeo-Christian culture were being undermined even while it looked like we were being successful in reaching people with the Gospel. Too many of our “converts” did not truly become born again, and hardly any of them were being taught the Christian worldview, much less sound doctrine.

The second mistake was a superficial understanding of the Lordship of Christ and its implications for all of life. Christian truth does not exist in an isolated, sealed chamber called “religion.” It is true truth *about the world*, because God is the Creator of the world. Therefore Christ is Lord not just of my religion but of my *life*. No distinction can be made between “sacred” and “secular” realms of life that is not arbitrary. C.S. Lewis expressed the truth starkly but accurately: “There is no neutral ground in the universe; every square inch, every split second is claimed by God and counter-claimed

by Satan.”¹³ As J. Gresham Machen put it, “The field of Christianity is the world. The Christian cannot be satisfied so long as any human activity is either opposed to Christianity or out of connection with Christianity.”¹⁴ If what the Bible teaches about God, man, and the world is true, it should make a difference in every area of life: how we relate to our family, to our fellow man, to work, to the state, to education, athletics, the arts — everything. Every area of private life, every arena of public life, must now be seen not as something existing autonomously on its own, but as something that exists in relation to Christ: to be redeemed by His grace, informed by His Word, brought into submission to His Lordship, and pursued for His glory. Most of our churches do not even make an effort to teach such things — which means they are making no effort to be disciple-making communities.

It is easy to miss the radical relevance of Christian truth to all of life because in many areas there is no difference *on the surface*. The solution to a mathematical equation is the same for a Christian,

¹³ C.S. Lewis, “Christianity and Culture,” in *Christian Reflections*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), 33.

¹⁴ Machen, *Education, Christianity, and the State*, 50.

a neopagan, and an atheist. The solution to which chemical formula of additives to my gasoline will make my car run smoothly and efficiently, or to which medicine will make my body do so, is the same whether I am a Christian, a Hindu, or a Muslim. The grammar by which I must construct my sentences to make them intelligible and the rhetorical flourishes by which I can arrange them to make them powerful are the same whether I am writing an evangelistic sermon, a promotion for Planned Parenthood, or a translation of *The Communist Manifesto*. There is no particularly “Christian” way of doing any of those things, or a host of other things. But that does not mean there is no difference as to *whether, how, or why* a Christian should do them.

Two plus two equal four. They do and must equal four and no other number, whatever your religious beliefs or philosophy of life. The Christian and the Non-Christian see the same truth — but they do not (or should not) see it the same way. The Non-Christian says, “Two plus two equal four. I have no idea why. It just seems to work. If I don’t take account of this strangely stable fact when I try to balance my checkbook, I will get myself in a heap of trouble eventually, so I just accept it, and then never give it another thought. Whatever.” The Christian

should look at the same fact very differently: “Two plus two equal four. I can always trust this to be true. And it is thus an awe-inspiring example of the transcendent rationality and trustworthy covenant faithfulness of the beautiful mind of our glorious God, which reminds me to worship Him every time I balance my checkbook. Blessed be He!”

This is not just a matter of the Christian having access to an inspiring emotional penumbra around his facts when he wants it. Seeing all facts as God’s facts always makes a practical difference too. Even when we do the same things as Non-Christians, we do them for different motives and with a different ultimate purpose in view. As a Christian I am not a private individual who has the option of making decisions solely to please myself. I am the servant of Another, bought with a price; I am the steward of the earth and the steward (not the owner) of all my own possessions; I am an Ambassador for Christ. Everything I do, and the way I do it, either advances or thwarts the objectives inherent in these identities. So I do not work just to make a living. I work to *serve* my employer and my neighbor *out of love*. The quality with which I do that is the context out of which my testimony for Christ flows. Martin Luther said somewhere that if you are a Christian cobbler, you accomplish all of this not by putting

little crosses on your shoes, but by making really good shoes. A like mentality pervades my approach to every aspect of my life: as a husband or wife, a father or mother, a neighbor, an employee, an employer, a consumer, a citizen, a person just resting and relaxing, I must let my light so shine before men that they will see my good works and glorify my Father who is in heaven (Mat. 5:16). And I do it all not as a burdensome duty but as an expression of the joy of life, of gratitude for my redemption, and of love for God and my neighbor. There is not a single atom of reality or iota of truth about reality that comes into my field of vision that I do not see in relation to Christ.¹⁵

THESIS 5: THE CHRISTIAN SUBCULTURE IN ANY SOCIETY SHOULD BRING SALT AND LIGHT TO THAT SOCIETY THROUGH ITS OWN CULTURAL ACTIVITY, BOTH IN CREATING AND CONSUMING CULTURE.

Everything we do as Christians should reflect our identity as sub-creators, stewards,

¹⁵ I spoke of this kind of seeing as “wholeness of vision” that flows from “biblical consciousness” in *Inklings of Reality: Essays toward a Christian Philosophy of Letters* (Lynchburg: Lantern Hollow Press, 2012). See that book for more practical advice on how to cultivate wholeness of vision and the Christian culture that should reflect it.

servants, and ambassadors of Christ. And because we are sub-creators, everything we do will make — or mar — culture, in one way or another. As homemakers, family members, gardeners, cooks, workers, voters, participators in social media, consumers of products, patrons of movies, books, music, and plays, members of clubs and of churches, and in a thousand other roles, we never cease to be both creators and consumers of culture. As people with a different set of beliefs which, however imperfectly, affect our sense of who we are, we will do it in our own unique way (or set of ways, since even the Christian subculture is not monolithic or uniform). Those different ways of life will get noticed as a subset of the larger culture which will interact with it in complex ways. American Christians will have their own ways of being Americans, for example; they are not going to live like First-Century Middle-Eastern peasants in the midst of American society. That all this will happen is inevitable. That we will do it well, or even deliberately, or thoughtfully, or intelligently, or faithfully to sound Christian teaching, is not.

Jesus uses two metaphors for His followers' presence in the world that describe the way they are supposed to relate to it and interact with it: salt and light. We are the salt of the earth, so we had better

not lose our taste (Mat. 5:13). And we are the light of the world, so we had better not let ourselves be hidden away (Mat. 5:14-15) but rather be seen in such a way that our good works glorify the Father (Mat. 5:16). Salt was valued both as a preservative and as a flavoring. Light shows the path and shows up both good and evil for what they are (John 3:19-21). So the church's presence in the world should retard its natural slide toward corruption and evil, bring out and enhance the flavor of what is good in it, and keep the way toward grace and truth open and visible to people's eyes so that the Holy Spirit can call them into it.

We do this by preaching the Gospel and sharing our testimony, of course. We should also be doing it by showing the difference following Christ makes in our total way of life. We are still fallen people who sometimes stumble badly, but we should be stumbling on a new path in a new direction. (Remember that Christianity was first called simply "the Way.") That new path is marked by the new identity we have already been given in Christ (restored sub-creators, faithful stewards, heavenly ambassadors), and the new direction is toward the full incarnation of that identity that we will receive in its fullness and without compromise when we see Christ face to face. In the meantime, if our work

manifests reliable quality for a fair price, if our homes manifest loving hierarchy without oppression, if our lives manifest creative applications of biblical principles that reveal goodness, truth, and beauty in many ways that can join with the heavens to declare the glory of God (Psalm 19:1), then our preaching of the Gospel will have a credibility and a power that we have not seen in our generation. Then the culture of the Kingdom of Heaven, reaching back into this present evil age in foretastes of the glory that is to come and finding ways to express itself in the idiom of the fallen cultures it invades, will be *seen*. And that may be the most convincing apologetic of all.

I have hesitated long over these next few paragraphs. I fear that I will not be able to write them so as to avoid some people charging me with elitism. And if elitism is what I am heard as preaching, I will have failed. Elitism lacks the divine humility that should characterize any genuine Christian culture. But bear with me if I sound elitist for the moment. I will try to redeem myself from that charge before the end.

I won't try to assess what kind of Christian subculture we have created in our homes, offices, or workshops. It no doubt ranges from splendid to abysmal, as one would expect. Others are better

equipped to speak of those manifestations. Here I am thinking of the face we as Evangelicals and Fundamentalists present to the world with respect to that salient area of human creativity that is often mistakenly equated with culture: the arts. I am afraid it reflects the basic superficiality of our movement, which has often been described as a river a mile wide and an inch deep. What have we given to the world? Southern Gospel; “Praise and Worship;” the “Christian Romance Novel;” paintings of unrealistically pretty landscapes or Victorian villages with Bible verses tacked beneath them; cutesy figurines of angels who could not say, “Fear not!” with credibility if their wings depended on it.

There. I’ve just offended some of you. Forgive me, and hear me out. Not everything I just listed is always bad or inherently trashy. I like some Southern Gospel myself, when it stays close to its roots in folk music and the Negro spiritual. I don’t think less of you if you do too. But nothing I just listed can pretend to be “high” or “serious” art. Why is that a problem? Why do we care if we are not nurturing a bunch of hoity-toity, snotty *artistes* who think they are better than everybody else? Because the very way I just framed that complaint loudly shouts of a prejudice against excellence that is absolutely foreign to, antithetical to, dismissive of,

and loaded with antipathy towards our marching orders in Philippians 4:8. “Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence, anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things.” And I framed it in precisely the terms that would be on the lips of too many of us. We should not despise “low” or “pop” culture. I don’t. Neither should we despise the high. As a whole, our movement does.

It has not always been this way. Conservative, Evangelical, Protestant piety once fostered the epics of Milton and Spenser, the devotional poetry of Donne and Herbert, the music of Bach and Handel.¹⁶ Where is the American Evangelical author who writes anything that is, or can be, appreciated for its literary value by non-Christians who are not already biased in favor of its message? You can think of a few Christians in the Twentieth Century who achieved this feat without compromising their Christian content: G.K. Chesterton, C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien,

¹⁶ For a brilliant analysis of how specifically Protestant spirituality once fostered a rich literary culture, see Barbara Kiefer Lewalski, *Protestant Poetics and the Sixteenth-Century Religious Lyric* (Princeton: Princeton Uni. Pr., 1979). For further discussion of these matters, see my *Inklings of Reality: Essays toward a Christian Philosophy of Letters*, op. cit., esp. chap. 10, “Why Evangelicals Can’t Write,” 207-14.

Dorothy L. Sayers, and Flannery O'Connor. None of them were American Evangelicals. Why not? You get what you value as a community, as a subculture; you get what you encourage; you get what you reward. One of the reforms desperately needed if we are to give full witness to the Gospel with credibility is a healthier attitude toward culture in general and the arts in particular.

How do we get there? Not by despising pop culture; not by suddenly running out and trying to be artsier than thou; definitely not by copying the decadent art of the secular culture we live in. We don't want more cacophonous music in our worship services, more incomprehensible poetry in our libraries, or more ugly and chaotic paintings on our walls. We do it by reforming our attitude toward culture in the terms of these theses. We do it by teaching our children to appreciate the best that has been written, sung, and painted in the past and to value those artistic monuments for what made them great. We do it by teaching them that human culture has value because it flows from human creativity which flows from the image of God, and that, for those so gifted, it is a way of serving God that is cherished by our community. We do it by praying for them in those terms and supporting them with our attention and our dollars when they

try. And then we may be astonished at the Renaissance, Reformation, and Revival that result.

This essay is excerpted from Williams's upcoming book, "Ninety-Five Theses for a New Reformation: A Roadmap for Post-Evangelical Christianity" (Semper Reformanda Publications, 2021).

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