**Culture**

Among people groups in the world, a phenomenon called “culture” has developed, which involves the sharing of certain features between those in a defined group. We will examine culture as an aspect of God’s plan for the social development of humanity.

Carl Henry proposes a good definition of culture: “Culture is a complex of shared beliefs and customs, laws and morals,”[[1]](#footnote-1) and, “By culture we mean those beliefs, norms and practices that distinguish the lifeview and lifestyle of a particular society.”[[2]](#footnote-2) In other words, we can define culture as the sum total of factors that unite a certain people group and distinguish it from others. We can include a common language, history, customs, and worldview. In Hiebert’s opinion, culture is an integrated system of learned thought and behavior that characterizes a certain culture.[[3]](#footnote-3) Nida states that culture includes “all learned behavior which is socially acquired.... It is a way of behaving, thinking, and reacting…. We see the manifestation of culture in objects, actions, and situations.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

How do cultures form? We trace their earliest development to the time after the Fall, when certain groups of people began to manifest certain distinguishing traits. Scripture distinguishes the line of Cain from the line of Seth (Gen 5), ascribing more praiseworthy behavior to the latter.

The flood of Noah, of course, erased all ethnicity and cultural diversity. The descendants of Noah’s sons strove for unity instead. God interpreted this unified humanity as a threat and disbursed humanity by confusing their languages. Therefore, the factor that precipitated the formation of postdiluvian cultures was language. Inability to communicate forced people groups to form around those with a common tongue and isolated them from others. In time, these groups formed their own unique worldviews, customs, and traditions that isolated them from other people groups even more.[[5]](#footnote-5) Genesis 10:5 describes the descendants of Japheth as a scattered people, characterized by cultural distinctions: “From these the coastlands of the nations were separated into their lands, every one according to his language, according to their families, into their nations.”

All people, including believers in Jesus Christ, belong to a certain culture. The Church, however, is a subculture in the midst of secular cultures, to which belong certain beliefs, experiences, and practices that define the faith and lifestyle of its members. Consequently, the Church and secular culture interface and interact one with another.

On the one hand, culture exercises a strong influence on believers’ lives, especially due to the fact that they were participants in their secular culture before they entered the subculture of the Church. Consequently, secular culture may define for believers their values, priorities, perspective, lifestyle, etc. It is vital, then, that believers are aware of those features of their culture that conflict with Christian faith, and of those that present no conflict. The Bible does not forbid participation in non-sinful aspects of one’s culture. Yet, when cultural values depart from biblical ones, the sincere believer will side with God.

Culture also influences how followers of Jesus interpret the Bible. We often read Scripture through the prism of our cultural values. Therefore, believers must be vigilant and attentive to ensure an honest and objective interpretation of the biblical text.[[6]](#footnote-6)

On the other hand, the Bible also indicates that the Church exercises a certain influence on secular culture. Jesus called His disciples to be the “salt of the earth” and the “light of the world” (Matt 5:13-14). Salt preserves, and light shows the right path. Therefore, by means of the Church God enlightens humanity with His truth and seeks to preserve it from destruction. We note how God promised Abraham that He would spare Sodom if He found only ten righteous persons there (Gen 18:32). We can claim that the presence of God’s people in the world today has a similar effect, and that God delays His judgment for our sake. A belief exists, in fact, that the “one who restrains” in 2 Thessalonians 2:6-7 is the Church, whose presence hinders the appearance of antichrist.

In conclusion of this topic, we will give a quick look at a well-known publication on this issue: *Christ and Culture*, by H. R. Niebuhr.[[7]](#footnote-7) He lists five different approaches to defining this relationship: Christ against culture, the Christ of culture, Christ above culture, Christ and culture in paradox, and Christ the transformer of culture. To simplify this scheme, we will focus on three options: rejection of culture, endorsement of culture, and sanctification of culture.

The first position asserts that believers should reject culture and separate themselves from people of this world. It is believed that human cultures are totally given over to sin. Therefore, Christians should have nothing to do with distorted secular culture and must refrain from participation in secular affairs.

Exponents of this view cite in support the biblical injunction to be separate from the world. Friendship with the world is forbidden (2 Cor 6:14; Jam 4:4). The world lies under the power of the evil one (1 Jn 5:19; 2 Cor 4:4). Our citizenship is in heaven (Phil 3:20). We are only strangers and aliens on this planet (1 Pet 2:11). Some early Fathers adopted this view, Tertullian in particular. Monasticism arose as a means to escape this sinful world and devote oneself to the Lord.[[8]](#footnote-8)

However, there are problems with this understanding. First, later in this section we will list biblical arguments supporting Christians’ involvement in the world. Second, when we examine passages of Scripture speaking of separation from the world, we must be careful to properly define the concept “world.”

The word “world” translates the Greek term κόσμος (*cosmos*)*,* which has several denotations, including: (1) the planet Earth, (2) humanity, and (3) a system of thought, belief, and action that is contrary to God and His ways. In other words, κόσμος (*cosmos*) can indicate: (1) where people live, (2) people themselves, or (3) how people live.

It is insightful to compare these three usages of κόσμος (*cosmos*) with the first three chapters of the book of Genesis. In chapter 1, God created the material world and all that it contains. Genesis chapter 2 focuses on the creation of people. Genesis 3 records the Fall of humanity into a state of sin and depravity. It is vital to distinguish these three meanings from one another in order to have a proper understanding of the relationship between Christianity and culture.

The apostle John devotes special attention to this question. In John 1:9, he speaks of κόσμος (*cosmos*) as the planet Earth: “There was the true Light which, coming into the world, enlightens every man.” In John 3:16, κόσμος (*cosmos*) refers to humanity: “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.” Finally, in 1 John 2:15-16, he speaks of κόσμος (*cosmos*) as an anti-God system of values: “Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world.” All three nuances of κόσμος (*cosmos*) are found in John 17:15-18.

So then, separation form the world does not mean isolation from the planet or its inhabitants, but rejecting worldly values and lifestyle. The world we must separate ourselves from is not culture in its entirety, but from the anti-God values and sinful practices that it sometimes promotes. Since at times cultural values may overlap with biblical standards and some cultural practices are morally neutral (neither right nor wrong), we cannot recommend total abstinence from cultural life.

The second approach is to reconcile Christ with human cultures and unify them. On the other hand, it is clear that all human cultures embrace certain values and practices that depart from the biblical norm. In fact, Paul summons all peoples of all cultures to repent (Acts 17:26-30). Peter calls the secular world of his day a “perverse generation” (Acts 2:40).[[9]](#footnote-9)

The final option, “sanctification of culture,” acknowledges both positive and negative elements in the cultures of the world and feels that God can cleanse and restore human cultures to conformity with His standards. We defend the claim that culture contains positive elements by citing passages where people observed certain cultural practices without censor from the Lord.[[10]](#footnote-10) Even after his conversion to Christ, Paul observed certain Jewish traditions, like taking a Nazirite vow (Acts 18:18; 21:21-26) and celebrating the feast of Pentecost in Jerusalem (Acts 20:16).[[11]](#footnote-11)

In addition, Paul viewed cultural adaptation as an effective tool for evangelization. He became “all things to all men, so that I may by all means save some” (1 Cor 9:22). We also consider the incarnation of God’s Son a powerful example of adaptation to human culture. The Son of God laid aside His heavenly glory to become human and participate in Jewish culture.

A definite advantage to cultural diversity is that people from different cultures may look at the Scriptures and interpret them differently. These different perspectives can potentially enrich our understanding of the Bible in general. In addition, in 1 Corinthians 12 we see that God prefers diversity in unity. Cultural diversity, then, can enrich life in general.[[12]](#footnote-12)

We also note that in Revelation 7:9, all peoples of the earth stand before the Lord. Their ethnicity is not erased, but is still recognized even after the rapture of the Church. Finally, according to the principle voiced in 1 Timothy 6:17, believers in the Lord are allowed to enjoy earthly pleasures, including customs of their culture, provided that they present no contradiction to God’s will.[[13]](#footnote-13)

If we conclude, then, that the best approach to culture is to sanctify it, we must nonetheless heed several warnings. The Bible reveals that every culture has its vices, which believers must avoid (see Lev 18:30; Mk 7:8; Acts 15:20). Additionally, believers must undergo renewal of their minds to overcome false ideas and convictions instilled in their thinking by their cultural milieu (Rom 12:2; Eph 4:23).[[14]](#footnote-14)

Finally, we must acknowledge, “That which is highly esteemed among men is detestable in the sight of God” (Lk 16:15). That is, culture may highly value something that is reprehensible before the Lord. Citing Isaiah, Peter emphasizes the temporal nature of earthly glory: “All flesh is like grass, and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls off, but the word of the Lord endures forever” (1 Pet 1:24-25).

1. Henry C. F. H. God, Revelation, and Authority. – Waco, TХ: Word Books, 1976-1983. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1999. – V. 5. – P. 406. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid., v. 5, p. 395. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Hiebert P. G. Cultural Anthropology. – 2nd ed. – Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1983. – P. 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Nida E. cited in Sookhdeo P. Cultural Issues in Partnership in Mission // Taylor W. D. Kingdom Partnerships for Synergy in Missions / World Evangelical Fellowship Missions Commission. – Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1994. – P. 52. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Henry, v. 5, p. 396; Abate E. The Сhurch, Сulture and Еthnicity: А Тheological View // Evangelical Review of Theology. 2000. № 24. – P. 144. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Sookhdeo, p. 53; Henry, v. 5, p. 397. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Niebuhr H. R. Christ and Сulture. – New York: Harper and Brothers, 1951. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Niebuhr, p. 56. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See Judg 14:10; Ruth 4:7; 2 Kin 11:14; Est 1:13; 9:27-30; Jn 19:40; Acts 25:16 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Kaiser W. C. Hard Sayings of the Bible. – Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1996. – P. 537-539. Yet we also take into consideration that these “cultural activities” are rooted in God’s Old Testament revelation. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Sookhdeo, p. 61. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Gangel K. O. Christian Higher Education and Contemporary Culture: Isolation or Penetration? // Bibliotheca Sacra. 1978. № 135:540. P. 298. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Abate, p. 145-146. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)