Christian Cultural Insularity

A Report by Wheatstone Ministries

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INTRODUCTION

Wheatstone invites youth into Christian adulthood. This mission, though aimed at individuals, has broader social implications. When youth enter adulthood, they become participants and agents in culture in new ways. Their new social status confers greater responsibility, allowing them greater access to culture and a stronger cultural voice.

The problem, however, is that Christians have failed to appropriately engage and shape culture. Because of this, the next generation is ill-equipped to participate in cultural dialogue with a strong, reputable voice. This is not due to a lack of Christian presence; Christians have a strong presence in politics, media outlets, and have a favorable reputation among the majority of Americans. Yet, Christian influence in American culture is disproportionate to the strength of our presence.

The cause is the phenomenon of "cultural insularity," by which we mean the limited cultural influence Christians have beyond their own created, cultural horizons. This problem is twofold. First, we have failed to adequately understand the complexities of culture and the means by which cultures change. Second, we have failed to create strategies of cultural influence that account for those complexities. Instead, Christians have created sub-cultures or competing cultures that have little to no influence in "secular" culture.

Wheatstone works for the restoration of cultural influence by reaching the next generation. With a nuanced understanding of what culture is and how it changes, Wheatstone liberates and empowers young Christians to participate in culture excellently as they enter Christian adulthood.

1 Sociologist Bradley Wright comments on a 2008 Gallup Poll, "About 1 in 4 Americans have negative feelings toward [Evangelical Christians and Fundamentalist Christians], with the rest having positive or neutral feelings." In Christians are Hate-Filled Hypocrites...and Other Lies You've Been Told, 186.
1. WHAT IS CULTURE?

In order to know how to have effective cultural influence, we must first understand what culture is and the means by which it changes. Social theorists have competing views on what constitutes culture, but they agree on one thing: its complexity. Indeed, the diversity of their theories testifies to the complexity of the descriptive problem.

In recent years, there has been renewed interest in the proper Christian tactics for cultural influence. Rising voices in the Christian community suggest new ways forward, agreeing that Christians need to return to cultural prominence. Andy Crouch, in his influential book, *Culture Making,* for example, suggests that cultures are more than the sum total of ideas. This is in direct contrast to the formerly prevailing apologetics or worldview approach to cultural change. In Crouch’s view, cultures are essentially made of the artifacts that give shape to the world in which we live. Yet in a similar way to the worldview approaches that he rejects, Crouch’s popular idea, and others like it, does not account for culture’s complexities.

It fails because any quantitative-based means of describing culture does not sufficiently account for culture’s non-quantitative components. Culture certainly includes artifacts and ideas and specific populations, but it is also historically situated, located within complex networks, and it changes over time through centers of cultural power, as Hunter successfully argues in *To Change the World.* Cultures are not only collections of human thought and artifacts; they are “social heritages” that give contour to all social interactions and networks.

Many current Christian ministries that seek to address culture use models based in worldview formation or simple mass evangelism. While it’s true that ideas have consequences and that cultures include populations, those ideas and populations have cultural power “not because [they] are inherently truthful or obviously correct but rather because of the way they are embedded in very powerful institutions, networks, interests, and symbols.” If we want to influence the culture for Christ, we have to do more than change worldviews or convert mass audiences. We have to understand cultural formation at its most basic levels.

Any strategy to engage or influence culture, then, must account for these complexities. In order to raise a new generation of mature Christians with cultural influence, we cannot hold a naïve view of culture or the means by which it changes.

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2 Andy Crouch, *Culture Making*, 23. “Culture is what we make of the world...paintings, omelets, chairs, snow angels. It is what human beings make of the world.” Though Crouch adds a second caveat, that cultures also include interpretations of these artifacts, his thesis remains the same.

3 For more, see chapter four: “An Alternative View of Culture and Cultural Change in Eleven Propositions” in Hunter’s *To Change the World.*


5 Hunter, *To Change the World*, 44.
2. HOW DOES CULTURE CHANGE?

Despite counterexamples, cultures typically change over decades. It is naïve to assume that broad, lasting cultural change can occur in one generation, or that lasting cultural influence can come from any one Christian organization. Quick changes in systems can occur relatively quickly, “but the most profound changes in culture typically take place over the course of multiple generations.” Furthermore, the seeds of seemingly quick cultural changes are typically sown long before the change actually occurs. Though political and economic systems can change suddenly, it takes generations for cultures to change in a substantial way.

What’s more, cultures change in ways that most popular Christian cultural commentators neglect. They don’t change from grassroots efforts. They don’t change with an influx of new ideas or correct worldviews. They don’t change by making more stuff. Rather, they change when Christians, liberated to exercise creativity in conversation with major cultural ideas, trends, and narratives do so in “high” institutions. It’s important to realize that the origin of cultural change typically occurs in the “high arts” and “high academia,” because these are the places that Christians have neglected since the turn of the twentieth century. It is from these places that ideas trickle down and influence popular thought and culture. Cultural ideas fostered in ivory towers and top galleries become the mainstream opinions a decade later. If Christians, therefore, are going to be able to effect significant cultural change, they must, as a minimum, become conversant with the high ideas and artifacts of the day. Ideally, Christians must enter those elite networks and do work that advances their conversations and creations in Christ-like directions. Yet this is not what Christians have done.

3. PAST STRATEGIES OF CHRISTIAN CULTURAL CHANGE

In recent times, Christians have started to examine ways to “engage” the culture in order to assert certain sets of social values. These strategies, though motivated by good desires (holiness, evangelism, etc.) have not achieved lasting Christian cultural influence. The following are four common ways by which Christians interact with culture.

Condemnation

The first strategy is the criticism. Christians, motivated by a desire for holiness, have condemned the culture in which they stood. But this is precisely the problem: those who condemn culture outright are caught in their own condemnation. It is impossible to stand “outside” of culture, to objectively critique it, because cultures are products of history and complex networks. Cultural condemnation fails to account for the inescapably formative nature of culture, and its basic power to form patterns of thought and behavior.

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6  Ibid, 45.
7  Crouch, Culture Making, 67.
Imitation

The second strategy is to create alternative, "safe" cultures in which Christians can enjoy cultural trends, but in a modified way. Christians who imitate culture in this way are typically interested in enjoying culture's benefits without any of its perils. The result is, as Crouch describes, "an entire subcultural world within which Christians comfortably move and have their being without ever encountering the broader cultural world they are imitating." Cultural imitation gives the illusion of creativity and participation when, in reality, it cuts Christians off from their broader cultural context, rendering them mute in cultural exchanges.

Retreat

The third strategy is to avoid culture and its influences through wholesale retreat, often into Christian subcultures. This posture toward culture results in a general suspicion, fear, and hostility toward cultural innovations and their influence. However, cultural withdrawal is an inadequate solution for cultural change. It is impossible to wholly resign or retreat from culture because they, as Hunter notes, "provide the very terms by which life is ordered." To think that Christians can escape or avoid the influence of culture is to misunderstand culture as a smaller set of values and principles than it is. Culture is big and formative, and it creates patterns of behavior for entire societies.

Unreflective Consumption

The final strategy is to consume cultural products without reflection. This mode of cultural participation forfeits creative freedom and creates cultural slaves. It is ultimately "capitulation" to culture, "letting the culture set the terms, assuming that the culture knows best and that even our deepest longings and fears have some solution that fits comfortably within our culture's horizons." Christians become willingly subject to content creators. Further, the thoughtless consumption of cultural goods reinforces adolescent behavior. As Thomas Bergler reminds us, "consumerism and juvenilization reinforce one another. People who know who they are, who think carefully about purchases, and who exercise self-control are harder to persuade to buy products they don't really need."

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8 Ibid., 94.
9 Hunter, To Change the World, 46.
10 Crouch, Culture Making, 96.
4. THE NEXT GENERATION OF CULTURAL INFLUENCE

We need a new understanding of Christian social responsibility. We don't need to think of new ways to “engage” the culture as much as we need to learn to be faithful and free within it. We don't need more social power, we need wise social presence.

The next generation has the capacity to enter places of cultural influence as mature disciples of Christ: living in freedom, practicing creativity, and exploring with courage. They can do so if we help them:

**Practice creativity, not consumption**

Christians who imitate Christ's creativity are able to influence culture. They are not enslaved to cultural products, but are able to contribute to culture using their unique creative talents.

**Explore culture without fear**

Christians cannot fear the culture they inhabit. Instead, they should be made free to explore it faithfully. There is no place they can go where Christ is not Lord.

**Question social structures without rejecting them or ignoring their power**

Christians with cultural influence are not naïve. They understand that cultures change through centers of cultural power and through certain social structures.

**Become conversant with big ideas and great art**

Christians need to understand the mediums of cultural change in order to have an influential voice. Since cultures change from “high” institutions, the next generation needs to be able to converse with them.

**Become free from self-limiting fears, and empowered to achieve great things**

Christians need to see that Christ has given them everything they need to faithfully and freely imitate him. The next generation needs to be liberated from fear and inspired to do great things. By practicing creativity, exploring with courage, questioning social structures, and having the vocabulary to be culturally conversant, the next generation will finally recover Christian cultural influence.
CONCLUSION: RECOVERING A CULTURAL VOICE

We need a new generation of Christians who are neither afraid of culture nor enslaved to it. We need a new generation of men and women who are faithful to their societies. These Christians will restore Christian prominence in the culture, but a Christianity that is characterized by faithful discipleship and maturity. We will recover cultural prominence by helping the next generation practice mature Christianity. We will invite them into Christian adulthood.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


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