

The Gospel & Culture | Romans | November 12, 2017

Continuing my review of Paul's letter to "all" those in Rome who are Christ followers the following focus centers on the dynamic of the gospel and its transformative power within human social life, or stated with more specificity, culture. As Gordon Fee states, "Romans is totally taken up with Paul's passion for the gospel, whose goal is the creation—by redemption—of a single people for God's name out of Jew and Gentile together. It is this latter concern that drives the argument from beginning to end. The dynamics of the letter result from the twin facts (1) that the Roman church is a mixed—perhaps divided—community, who were having difficulty holding Jew and Gentile together as one people of God, and (2) that Paul is attempting to speak to a situation in a community over which he has no jurisdiction but to which he hopes soon to come, in order to find a favorable base for ministry in the West. The issue in Rome apparently stems from the Jewish side, with their concerns about Gentile believers and especially the latter's relationship to Torah." *God's Empowering Presence*, page 473.

I concluded last week with the question, *if Paul were writing to Green Bay today, what would he write?* This is a complex question and does not have a simple answer. It involves the difficult area of culture and how the gospel relates, speaks into and has the power to transform and recreate – just as he wrote to those in conflict due to their different cultural backgrounds – Jew and Gentile. Following is a passage containing a good overview and provides good handholds toward our desire to be transformed.

Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement In Christian History*, (Orbis, 1997).

Christianity has throughout its history spread outwards, across cultural frontiers, so that each new point on the Christian circumference is a new potential Christian centre. And the very survival of Christianity as a separate faith has evidently been linked to the process of cross-cultural transmission... Each phase of Christian history has seen a transformation of Christianity as it has entered and penetrated another culture. There is no such thing as "Christian culture" or "Christian civilization". There have been several different Christian civilizations already; there may yet be many more. The reason for this lies in the infinite translatability of the Christian faith... The Christian Scriptures are open to translation; nay, the great Act on which Christian faith rests, the Word becoming flesh and pitching tent among us, is itself an act of translation. 22-23

Andy Crouch, *Culture Making: Recovering Our Creative Calling* (IVP Books, Illinois, 2008).

POSTURES AND GESTURES

I've found that a helpful word for these various responses is postures. Our posture is our learned but unconscious default position, our natural stance. It is the position our body assumes when we aren't paying attention, the basic attitude we carry through life. 90 [Interpretational reflex, Kraft]

What began as an occasional gesture appropriate for particular opportunities and challenges, has become a basic part of their approach to the world. Something similar, it seems to me, has happened at

each stage of American Christian's engagement with culture. Appropriate gestures toward particular cultural goods can become, over time, part of the posture Christians unconsciously adopt toward every cultural situation and setting. Indeed, the appeal of the various postures of condemning, Critiquing, copying and consuming—the reason that all of them are still very much with us—is that each of these responses to culture is, at certain times and with specific cultural goods, a necessary gesture. 90

Condemning culture. Some cultural artifacts can only be condemned. [90] ...Nazism, a self-conscious attempt to enthrone a particular culture and destroy others, was another wide-ranging cultural phenomenon that demanded Christian condemnation, as Karl Barth, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and other courageous Christians saw in the 1930s. It would not have been enough to form a “Nazi Christian Fellowship” designed to serve the spiritual needs of up-and-comers within the Nazi party. Instead, Barth and Bonhoeffer authored the Barmen Declaration, an unequivocal rejection of the entire cultural apparatus that was Nazi Germany. 90, 91

Critiquing culture. Some cultural artifacts deserve to be critiqued... 91

Consuming culture. There are many cultural goods for which by far the most appropriate response is to consume. When I make a pot of tea or bake a loaf of bread, I do not condemn it as a worldly distraction from spiritual things, nor do I examine it for its worldview and assumptions about reality... The only appropriate thing to do with these cultural goods is to consume them. 92

Copying culture. Even the practice of copying cultural goods, borrowing their form from the mainstream culture and infusing them with Christian content, has its place. When we set out to communicate or live the gospel, we never start from scratch. Even before church buildings became completely indistinguishable from warehouse stores, church architects were borrowing from “secular” architects. Long before the Contemporary Christian Music industry developed its uncanny ability to echo any mainstream music trend, church musicians from Bach to the Wesleys were borrowing well-known tunes and reworking them for liturgical use. Why shouldn't the church borrow from any and every cultural form for the purposes of worship and discipleship? The church, after all, is a culture-making enterprise itself, concerned with making something of the world in the light of the story that has taken us by surprise and upended our [92] assumptions about the world. Copying culture can even be, at its best, a way of honoring culture, demonstrating the lesson of Pentecost that every human language, every human cultural form, is capable of bearing the good news. 92, 93

WHEN GESTURES BECOME POSTURES

The problem comes when these gestures become too familiar, become the only way we know how to respond to culture, become etched into our unconscious stance toward the world and become postures. 93

Because while there is much to be **condemned** in human culture, the posture of condemnation leaves us closed off from the beauty and possibility as well as the grace and mercy in many forms of culture... having condemnation as our posture makes it almost impossible for us to reflect the image of a God who called the creation “very good”... If we are known mostly for our ability to poke holes in every human project, we will probably not be known as people who bear the hope and mercy of God. 93

When **critique** becomes a posture, we end up strangely passive, waiting for culture to deliver us some new item to talk about. Critique as a posture, whole an improvement over condemnation as a posture, can leave us strangely unable simple to enjoy cultural goods, preoccupied with our interrogation of their “worldview” and “presuppositions.” The posture of critique also temps us toward the academic fallacy of believing that once [93] we have analyzed something, we have understood it. Often true understanding, of a person or a cultural good, requires participation—throwing ourselves fully into the enjoyment and experience of someone or something without reserving an intellectual, analytical part of ourselves outside of the experience like a suspicious and watchful librarian. 93, 94

Cultural **copying**, too, is a good gesture and a poor posture... when all we do is copy culture for our own Christian ends, cultural copying fails to love or serve our neighbors. The greatest danger of copying culture, as a posture, is that it may well become all too successful. We end up creating an entire subcultural world within which Christians comfortably move and have their being without ever encountering the broader cultural world they are imitating. We breed a generation that prefers facsimile to reality, simplicity to complexity (for cultural copying, almost by definition, ends up sanding off the rough and surprising edges of any cultural good it appropriates), and familiarity to novelty. Not only is this a generation incapable of genuine creative participation in the ongoing drama of human culture making, it is dangerously detached from a God who is anything but predictable and safe. 94

Finally, **consumption** is the posture of cultural denizens who simply take advantage of all that is offered up by the every-busy purveyors of novelty, risk-free excitement and pain avoidance. It would not be entirely true to say that consumers are undiscerning in their attitude toward, culture, because discernment of a kind is at the very heart of consumer culture. Consumer culture teaches us to pay exquisite attention to our own preferences and desire... the core premise of consumer culture: we are most human when we are purchasing something someone else has made. Of all the possible postures toward culture, consumption is the one that lives most unthinkingly within a culture’s preexisting horizons of possibility and impossibility. 95

Consumption, as a posture, is capitulation: letting the culture set the terms, assuming that the culture knows best and that even our deepest longings (for beauty, truth, love) and fears (of loneliness, loss, death) have some solution that fits comfortably within our culture’s horizons, if only we can afford to purchase it. 96

ARTISTS AND GARDENERS

What is missing, I’ve come to believe, were the two postures that are most characteristically biblical—the two postures that have been least explored by Christians in the last century. They are found at the very beginning of the human story, according to Genesis: like our first parents, we are to be creators and cultivators. Or to put it more poetically, we are artists and gardeners. 97

The postures of the artist and the gardener have a lot in common. Both begin with contemplation, paying close attention to what is already there... And then, after contemplation, the artist and the gardener both adopt a posture of purposeful work. They bring their creativity and effort to their calling.

The gardener tends what has gone before, making the most of what is beautiful and weeding out what is distracting or useless... 97

I wonder what we Christians are known for in the world outside our churches. Are we known as critics, consumers, copiers, condemners of culture? I'm afraid so. Why aren't we known as cultivators—people who tend and nourish what is best in human culture, who do the hard and painstaking work to preserve the best of what people before us have done? Why aren't we known as creators—people who dare to think and do something [97] that has never been thought or done before, something that makes the world more welcoming and thrilling and beautiful? 97, 98

If there is a constructive way forward for Christians in the midst of our broken but also beautiful cultures, it will require us to recover these two biblical postures of cultivation and creation. And that recovery will involve revisiting the biblical story itself, where we discover that God is more intimately and eternally concerned with culture than we have yet come to believe. 98