

## ***Critiquing Culture Making: Recovering Our Creative Calling***

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How do we make our lives matter for the gospel in the context of our surrounding culture? Do we simply put our head in the sand or do we seek to change it for the better? “The desire to engage culture is one of most hopeful developments of recent decades” says Andy Crouch in his book *Culture Making: Recovering our Creative Calling* (9). Crouch presents to his fellow Christians a new and old direction for understanding our calling in our culture while offering a new terminology to breathe new life into this issue (10). As a cultural analyzer Crouch makes some very intriguing insights. However, his Achilles heel is shown when he imposes his culture terminology into his interpretations from Scripture. He often fails to see the redemptive significance of Scriptural passages he uses in order to make it fit into his own understanding of culture. His two major downfalls are his artificial hermeneutic interpretations of Scripture and his lack of providing a coherent biblical model that Christians can trust to be faithful to Scripture.

For Crouch, it is pivotal to understand the meaning of the word “culture” otherwise we as Christians do not know what we are responding to. We cannot limit culture to being defined as a worldview opposing God since it does not fulfill the practical sense of the word (64). Simply put, culture according to Crouch is the activity of making goods out of the world (24). Every cultural good that we are familiar with today such as an automobile or a cell phone have consequences that affects other cultural goods that will also influence our way of life. Crouch points out that there are consequences that may initiate a beneficial response from that cultural good or have consequences in sacrificing the existence of another cultural good. Cell phones, for example, have made mobile communication possible while making stationary home phones gradually more obsolete. He calls this the “horizons of the possibility and impossibility (29). His treatment

of how we are to analyze the way we look at culture was interesting and helpful. He seems to capture the essence of culture in how we experience it on a daily basis. My criticism, however, to Crouch's developed thought of culture is the lack of emphasis on the magnitude of sin and its inevitable influence towards both Christians and non-Christians in the context of culture.

In the chapter, "The Garden and the City" Crouch describes the beginning of the role culture plays in Scripture. Crouch describes God as the very first culture maker (103). As His image bearers we mimic the character of our Creator. Therefore, we must rule, cultivate and create culture *ex nihilo* as God did (104). The last quality is where I greatly disagree with Crouch. His understanding of what the term *ex nihilo* means is historically problematic because it does not match with how Christians have defined it over the ages. Crouch is trying to use the term to emphasize our ability to make use of what God has given us to create something that has never been made before (105). Unfortunately, this usage will not suffice. We cannot cause anything into being by the sheer power of our voice. Only God and God alone can possess this characteristic.

In Genesis 2, Crouch makes the mistake of reading too much into the text without first being aware of the redemptive significance of the actual passage. Chapter 2 of Genesis is where the story of how our call to culture begins (107). Within the context of the Garden (which is the first creation of culture), God gives Adam an opportunity to demonstrate his creativity by "speaking out of nothing" in giving names to the animals (110). This, according to Crouch, is an example of God's best gift to humanity, culture. Unfortunately, this gift is one God would soon regret giving as Adam and Eve failed to keep their duty as cultivators according to God's original intention (113). In response to the fall God decides to be a culture maker once again by taking something from his creation (animal skin) to make it into a cultural good for Adam and

Eve (124). This kind of interpretation strips away the significance of the fall and the redemptive provision of God towards his covenant people. In the great chasm that sin caused between God and man after the fall, we see God initiating his redemptive plan by graciously clothing them as a sign of protection from His own just punishment that will be fulfilled in the work of Jesus Christ. Biblically, we must also affirm that God is exhaustively sovereign in His plan, even over the fall itself.

Crouch's chapter, "Jesus as Culture Maker" is a perfect example of how dangerous it is to interpret Scripture by using non-biblical terms (cultivator and culture) and making assumptions without any textual evidence. In describing Christ as a cultivator of culture, Crouch states how Jesus spent his prime years in "simply absorbing, practicing and passing on his culture not preaching, not healing, not introducing the dramatic innovations that would bring him into conflict with the nation's leaders" (136). My first question after reading this is on what basis can he say that? If there is no text to support your claims then there is no warrant to proclaim it as if it was a given. Another example is when Crouch claimed that the primary focus of Jesus' ministry was not so much about addressing "spiritual issues" but towards being a "culture cultivator" (137). Imposing the term "cultivator" can lead to an artificial portrayal of who Christ is because it takes away rather than emphasizes Him being the Son of God.

Christ, according to Crouch, stretched the traditional rituals during his time fulfilling his role as being the perfect culture creator. Using Passover as an example, Crouch says that Christ "boldly reinterpreted them" and said that the cup would be the covenant made in His blood (138). Such a statement is an unbiblical claim to say the least. Scripture declares Christ to be the fulfillment of the Passover itself not someone who "reinterpreted" it (138). Many examples like these are present in this chapter showing the short hand of Crouch's ability to

coherently interpret the Word.

The Resurrection of Christ was the most culturally significant event in history (143). Christians changing their Sabbath day from Saturday to Sunday was considered a “cultural earthquake” (144). Crouch says that through the resurrection we see the transformation of the cultural artifact of the cross becoming a sign of the kingdom of God. In other words, Crouch is saying that the cross which used to be regarded as a negative symbol transformed into becoming a symbol of mercy and forgiveness. Crouch states that Christ’s death and resurrection displayed the ultimate end of God’s “culture rescuing project” by triumphing over the worst of human powers in a spiritual and culture sense (146). This is important to know because this is how Crouch evaluates important biblical events. He shapes his interpretations of an event as vital as the resurrection and inserts his own culture terminology. The danger of this is how other important aspects of the event can either be downplayed or just plainly left out. In this case, something essential as eternal life accomplished through Christ absorbing the wrath of His Father in our place is nowhere to be seen in Crouch’s interpretation of the cross.

In Crouch’s chapter, “From Pentecost...” the church in the book of Acts serves as an example to teach us how we are to interact and become effective in our culture (156). Its growth would depend not only on the message being proclaimed but on the cultural effects of a new approach to the sick and needy. A heart and will that would remain loyal to the helpless even if it would cost them their lives is the difference the church made in their daily service towards their neighbor (157). Though it was admirable of the church to have such a Christ-like mindset, I think Crouch downplays the power of the gospel through the work of the Holy Spirit as the transforming element in Acts. This reality of the gospel is what empowered the church to do God’s workmanship.

In the chapter entitled, “Why we can’t change world” Crouch discusses how many in our culture have developed a superficial understanding of this phrase. He points out that what this phrase really means for most is to make cultural changes within their surroundings (191). To take this literally you have to make a global cultural good that will influence all 6 billion people on the planet (190). This presents a paradox in Crouch’s eyes because, “transformed culture is at the heart of God’s mission in the world, and it is the call of God’s redeemed people. But changing the world is the one thing *we* cannot do. As it turns out, fully embracing this paradoxical reality is at the very heart of what it means to be a Christian culture” (189). The only solution to this paradox is the power of cultural goods because of the amount of potential influence they may have towards other spheres of culture (198). However, the problem is the lack of control we have towards the cultural goods since we are ultimately dependent on the response of the recipients (220). Crouch says that we should not be surprised of *our* lack of control over our cultural goods because when we look back at the Garden we see *God’s* lack of control over the fall. Therefore, all culture is a risk and it depends on the cultivation of the present and future generations (199). Here goes another example of Crouch’s liberal understanding of God in the context of his sovereignty. We can also see another example of his emphasis towards our abilities to create our own culture.

In the final chapter called “Grace” Crouch discusses a couple important points that Christians should expect if they are to remain as faithful culture cultivators. The reality of God’s grace for a Christian is not an exemption from disciplines because there is no greater value of disciplines than to be regularly brought to humility in trusting in the Lord for his strength (257). Quoting Jesus from the Sermon on the Mount, Crouch says that grace is for the poor in spirit (258). One other thing that a Christian

should look forward to is failure. The test of this is to see whether you hope is an enduring one under trials (260). Lastly, the pattern that we as Christians see, according to Crouch, is receiving abundant grace alongside with suffering. Both of which cannot be separated as two different categories (261).

Crouch's hope is that by the end of his book his audience would discover culture to be not about us, but about God (13). However, after his lengthy and entertaining exposition of our calling to create culture, he ends in emphasizing more on the duty and goal of the culture maker. Crouch closes his book by exhorting his audience to surround themselves with good company who will "fuel your dreams" and "have a holy willingness to spend their power alongside the powerless" so that together we can "make something of the world" (263). As reassuring as this may sound to his hearers, Crouch seems to be undermining the trust that we can have in God's sovereignty. Our enduring confidence is in the LORD who initiates, executes and consummates His plan to redeem culture and more importantly to rid the world of sin and death. The power of the preached gospel continues to gather his elect all over the world and calls those who are in utter darkness into the marvelous transforming light of Jesus Christ. Thus, our primary concern as Christians is living a life that shows evidence of the transforming power of the gospel while sharing it with others in every open opportunity of our everyday lives. If our focal point is to glorify God in everything we do, cultural changes will follow.