EVERY GENERATION FACES UNIQUE CHALLENGES. The first-century Church had Caesar's lions and the Colosseum. And, while it might seem like an unlikely comparison, the challenge of living with popular culture may well be as serious as persecution was for the saints of old.

Today we witness the tremendous power of pop culture to set the pace and priorities of our lives. We simply cannot afford to be indifferent about culture's influence—nor can we escape it, glibly condemn it, or Christianize it. Cultural expert Ken Myers helps us to engage pop culture from a historical and experiential perspective so that we can live in it with wisdom and discernment.

“A magnificent and timely book. Fresh, witty, informative, trenchant, and eminently sane, Myers's book is a must for thoughtful evangelicals.”

OS GUINNESS, cofounder of the Trinity Forum; author of The Case for Civility

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DOUG GROOTHUIS, Professor of Philosophy, Denver Seminary

KEN MYERS is director of Mars Hill Audio, an organization devoted to helping Christians think wisely about modern culture through a variety of audio resources. Prior to that, he was a producer and editor for National Public Radio and the executive editor of Eternity magazine. Myers is a graduate of the University of Maryland and of Westminster Theological Seminary.

CHRISTIAN LIVING
For Susannah and Jonathan,  
who are even more fun than  
“The Rockford Files”

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Writing *All God’s Children and Blue Suede Shoes* changed my life. It was not a writing project I came up with on my own. In the late 1980s, editor Marvin Olasky approached me about contributing a book to a series that explored various aspects of Christian interaction with culture. Since I had a background in media and had studied film theory and criticism as an undergraduate, he thought the subject of popular culture would be of interest to me. Marvin was persuasive, so I signed a contract and began a regimen of reading and thinking (as well as conversing and arguing) that eventually produced this book, and it has only intensified in the many years since.

Reflection on the question of how the development of what we call “popular culture” has changed the lives of modern people—and, more importantly, changed the life of the Church—has introduced me to many other areas of study in history, sociology, philosophy, aesthetics, and theology. That question has motivated me to read hundreds of books, many of whose authors I have been privileged to interview for the *Mars Hill Audio Journal*. Asking how the Church might avoid the deleterious effects of the hegemony of popular culture has occupied many waking hours and even invaded my dreams. It is possible that medication and intensive counseling could have prevented me from such an intense preoccupation, a course of action my wife has probably envisioned more than she’ll admit. But I remain persuaded of a brazen claim made in 1989 (without as much knowledge as I have acquired since then), that “the challenge of living with popular culture may well be as serious for modern Christians as persecution and plagues were for the saints of earlier centuries.”

I also insisted then that “Christian concern about popular culture should be as much about the sensibilities it encourages as about its content.” The convictions behind this claim have become harder to explain with the passage of time, because the sensibilities that I believe to be problematic have now become so dominant as to be imperceptible. “Sensibilities” is for some an elusive concept. Its meaning might be triangulated by introducing
other (perhaps equally elusive) phrases: the orientation of the affections, the posture of the soul, the desires of the heart, the characteristic hungers and expectations. The sensibilities I had in mind overlapped with the diagnosis implicit in the title to Neil Postman’s *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. People whose lives are dominated by the sensibilities of popular culture are more insistent that all experiences be fun, they are less interested in sustaining traditions, and they are unfazed by the charge that they aren’t behaving like mature adults.

In a 2005 article in *Youthworker Journal*, “Colonising the Adult Church: Our Part in the Spread of Consumerism and Commercialization,” youth minister Peter Ward argued that the sensibilities once limited to youth culture were now the dominant sensibilities everywhere, and churches were not unaffected by the changes:

> When we see retired guys buying Harley Davidsons and dressing up in leathers, forty-somethings packing the concert halls to witness the reunion of the Sex Pistols, and mums swapping clothes and even boyfriends with their daughters, we shouldn’t be surprised at the developments in the church. There was a time when young people wanted to grow up. Now adults don’t just want to be young again; they actually see themselves and present themselves as young.\(^1\)

Not all popular culture is produced for young people, but the spirit of popular culture continues to be the spirit of youth culture: suspicious of authority and of the past, allergic to formality, impatient with the limitations of propriety, and fearful of being perceived as uncool. To be young today—or stubbornly to think of oneself as young—is to see life as all possibility and no necessity.

Popular culture in its very structure advances this orientation toward life as pure possibility. Popular culture presents us with a set of attractive commodities, all freely chosen, rather than—as is the case with folk cultures or high culture—a cultural inheritance with boundaries, definition, and obligations. If I were to write this book today, one theme I would explore at much greater length is how popular culture is both an expression of and a conduit for the modern view of freedom, of the self, and of transcendent meaning. Living in the matrix of popular culture, we are encouraged to see ourselves as sovereign consumers who construct the

meaning of our lives from our free choices. By contrast, on a premodern (and Christian) view, the wisdom and meaning embedded in a cultural legacy—faithfully transmitted from one generation to the next—was an aid whereby we could be trained to discipline our desires and so be free from captivity to mere appetites. Cultures historically set boundaries; popular culture (as the preeminent form of modern culture) encourages liberation. Composed of webs of authoritative institutions, prescribed practices, and approved artifacts, traditional cultures conveyed an understanding of the world and cultivated the dispositions necessary to receive and sustain that understanding. Literary critic Marion Montgomery once observed that “education is the preparing of the mind for the presence of our common inheritance, the accumulated and accumulating knowledge of the truth of things.”2 Such preparation was not simply the task of formal schooling, but of all cultural institutions in concert.

**THE TRUTH OF THINGS**

The arrival of popular culture as we know it signals the tipping point of modern skepticism about the truth of things. Modern cultures (to the extent that they are modern) are characterized by their denial of the existence of the truth of things (more on this below). Whether we use the term youth culture, popular culture, or consumer culture, what they all have in common is the absence of elders whose institutional authority obligates them to convey that accumulated and accumulating inheritance. If I were rewriting this book today—having read many other books about culture—I would also give greater emphasis to the meaning of the modern setting in which popular culture arises. Within popular culture, many individual artifacts and practices do affirm a truth about things. But because we are free consumers of cultural commodities—because the system of popular culture neither establishes canons nor conveys taboos—we can choose whatever truth we want. Living within the system of popular culture, we find it more plausible that truth about the nature of things is private, not public, and ultimately purely subjective.

Sociologist Daniel Bell observed that what defines the modern is “the proposition that there are no ends or purposes given in nature; that the individual, and his or her self-realization, is the new standard of judgement; and that one can remake one’s self and remake society in an effort to

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achieve those goals.” Similarly theologian Lesslie Newbigin argued that
the central and most formative fact of modern culture is “the elimination
of teleology.” As Newbigin, Bell, and many others have observed, this
shift is a profound deviation from classical and Christian ways of under-
standing reality, in which cultures cultivated persons to abide by the grain
of the universe. C. S. Lewis describes the premodern view as one in which
“the cardinal problem had been how to conform the soul to reality, and
the solution had been knowledge, self-discipline, and virtue.” According
to the modern view—unwittingly set in motion by Bacon, Descartes, and
others—“the problem is how to subdue reality to the wishes of men.”
And there is no reality—no truth of things—to order our wishes.

One might be very purposeful about so subduing reality, but one’s
purpose in doing so would be entirely subjective, and hence, in a sense,
purposeless. Newbigin observes that there is a “strange fissure” run-
ning through the consciousness of modern man, who is encouraged to
understand the workings of the world apart from concepts of purpose.
“The ideal that he seeks would eliminate all ideals. With dedicated zeal
he purposes to explain the world as something that is without purpose.”
As long as modern culture insists that all “values” are subjective and not
tied to objective “facts”—that all attributions of purpose are private and
idiosyncratic—“this fissure cannot be healed. If purpose is not a feature
of the world of ‘facts,’ and if human beings entertain purposes, that is
their personal choice and they will have to create these purposes for them-
selves. These purposes cannot claim the authority of facts; they are per-
sonal opinions, and those who hold them can do so, provided they do not
interfere with the freedom of others to hold different opinions. But they
can claim no universal authority; they belong to the private world.”

If any autonomously chosen purpose is thus as good as any other,
widespread skepticism about or indifference toward the truth of things
is not surprising. Sociologist Craig Gay has observed that in the modern
account, “the order of Nature was thus no longer held to present an intrin-
sically meaningful order to which even reason must submit itself in faith if
it is to be fulfilled. Rather, the individual rational self was held to possess
the ability to ascribe its own internal order to reality, thereby rendering it

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3Daniel Bell, “Resolving the Contradictions of Modernity and Modernism” Society (March/April 1990): 43.
4Lesslie Newbigin, Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986), 34.
6Newbigin, Foolishness to the Greeks, 35.
7Ibid., 37.
meaningful.”8 One is thus free to establish purposes for oneself—as long as they don’t interfere in certain ways with the purposes of others. As Bell puts it, “The only question is what constitutes fulfillment of the self: endless pleasure, as in the round of Don Juan; the pyramidal accumulation of material goods; the private decision about moral conduct (as, for example, choice on abortion) as against ‘public’ morality or ‘natural’ law.”9

We have been living in a purpose-denying culture for some time; Nietzsche realized the consequences of such a cultural regime over a century ago, but many good people have been slow to recognize the depths of our dilemma and the kind of social reformation and reconstruction that would be necessary to prevent a more general and obvious nihilism from taking over. I am convinced that the effect of the system of popular culture is to reinforce this denial of purpose. And given the triumph of popular culture within all our major institutions—including many churches—we shouldn’t be surprised that an increasing number of young people seem aimless. If there’s ultimately nothing to aim at, why bother?

NORMALLY NIHILISTIC

Sociologist Christian Smith’s research on the spiritual lives of young people demonstrates that this essentially nihilistic assumption is deeply embedded in their consciousness. In his research about the cultural lives of “emerging adults,” he discovered an inability to affirm even the idea of the truth of things:

The majority of emerging adults . . . have great difficulty grasping the idea that a reality that is objective to their own awareness or construction of it may exist that could have a significant bearing on their lives. . . . They are de facto doubtful that an identifiable, objective, shared reality might exist across and around people that can serve as a reliable reference point for rational deliberation and argument. So, for example, when we interviewers tried to get respondents to talk about whether what they take to be substantive moral beliefs reflect some objective or universal quality or standard are simply relative human inventions, many—if not most—could not understand what we interviewers were trying to get at. They had difficulty seeing the possible distinction between, in this case, objective moral truth and relative human invention. This is not because

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9 Bell, “Resolving the Contradictions,” 46.
they are dumb. It seems to be because they cannot, for whatever reason, believe in—or sometimes even conceive of—a given, objective truth, fact, reality, or nature of the world that is independent of their subjective self-experience and that in relation to which they and others might learn or be persuaded to change. Although none would put it in exactly this way, what emerging adults take to be reality ultimately seems to consist of a multitude of subjective but ultimately autonomous experiences. People are thus trying to communicate with each other in order to simply be able to get along and enjoy life as they see fit. Beyond that, anything truly objectively shared or common or real seems impossible to access.10

Under the heading “It’s Up to the Individual,” Smith summarizes many of research findings:

According to emerging adults, the absolute authority for every person’s beliefs or actions is his or her own sovereign self. Anybody can literally think or do whatever he or she wants. Of course, what a person chooses to think or do may have bad consequences for that person. But everything is ultimately up to each individual to decide for himself or herself. The most one should ever do toward influencing another person is to ask him or her to consider what one thinks. Nobody is bound to any course of action by virtue of belonging to a group or because of a common good. Individuals are autonomous agents who have to deal with each other, yes, but do so entirely as self-directing choosers. The words duty, responsibility, and obligation feel somehow vaguely coercive or puritanical.11

It’s possible that the vast majority of twenty-somethings have come to these conclusions by reading atheistic philosophers, but my hunch is that they have absorbed their happy nihilism from living in a culture in which the modern denial of objective meaning has become institutionalized. According to the playbook of popular culture, all value judgments are expressions of preference. Who has ever told these young people, for example, that this piece of music is objectively better than that piece of music? Who has ever dared to say that this activity is more conducive to building character than that activity? Who has ever conveyed to them any notions of propriety or fittingness, suggesting, for example, that their manner of

11Ibid.
dress or deportment or speech was inappropriate to a particular occasion? Who, in other words, has exercised cultural authority? Within the dictates of popular culture, there is no authority other than popularity. In such a setting, belief in an objective moral order in the nature of things seems entirely implausible.

A culture is an ecosystem of institutions, practices, artifacts, and beliefs, all interacting and mutually reinforcing. Cultures are rarely entirely homogenous or consistent, but generalizations about specific cultures are nonetheless possible. Despite their complexity, cultures can have an overwhelming ethos. The incredulity toward ultimate purpose or meaning that characterizes modern culture isn’t simply a function of explicit beliefs contained as messages in discrete cultural artifacts. It is more deeply sustained by the practices and institutions in which we live and breathe and comprehend our being. What makes our culture modern is that despite the explicit beliefs by many citizens, our public institutions—education, government, the arts, entertainment, journalism, science and technology, commerce—all function without any necessary direction from any teleological vision. They operate without working toward any purpose beyond material benefit and the maximizing of choices for individuals. Discussion about the common good is strained at best because we have no shared vision of what the good is and believe that public life requires the bracketing of definitions of the good.

While more substantive, teleological beliefs may be held by many people and presented in some cultural artifacts, the dynamics of the system in which we live contradicts those beliefs. This dissonant situation makes such beliefs harder to acquire and sustain. As I argue in All God’s Children and Blue Suede Shoes, the form of cultural expression shapes the perception of its content, and in many cases (especially in music and other abstract arts) the form is the work’s content. When the form of communication (and the form of the system within which it is experienced) contradicts the content, the form often wins. This is in part because we are involved in formal structures at a deep, precognitive, often visceral level—a level closer to our hearts than our heads. If our affections and desires are nudged in a direction that contradicts the direction suggested by content, the content is likely to lose.

Media ecologist Marshall McLuhan provocatively insisted that “our conventional response to all media, namely that it is how they are used that counts, is the numb stance of the technological idiot. For the ‘content’ of
a medium is like the juicy piece of meat carried by the burglar to distract the watchdog of the mind.”¹² And while our minds are preoccupied with what may be very uplifting or noble content, the form may be imparting a very different way of viewing the world. If content that extolls “truth” or “natural law” is presented within a cultural ecosystem that sustains the sanctity of individual preference and that promotes cynicism toward anything not perceived to be immediately gratifying, that content is likely to be dismissed.

**THE HEART’S REASONS**

The role of culture in educating and nurturing its young was understood for millennia to be less a matter of conveying content than of shaping of the affections. Education—formal and informal—was not simply the imparting of knowledge or the skills to acquire knowledge, but the training of desires and emotions. As Lewis remarks in *The Abolition of Man*, “Until quite modern times all teachers and even all men believed the universe to be such that certain emotional reactions on our part could either be congruous or incongruous to it—believed, in fact, that objects did not merely receive, but could merit, our approval or disapproval, our reverence, or our contempt.”¹³ And so, children had to be “trained to feel pleasure, liking, disgust, and hatred at those things which really are pleasant, likable, disgusting, and hateful.”¹⁴

Today—in large measure thanks to the dominance of popular culture—the training of the affections is likely to be regarded as an elitist violation of individual autonomy. Our problem is not simply the presence of artifacts that encourage ignoble desires. It is the abandonment by our dominant institutions of the task of deliberately directing desires toward what really is true, good, and beautiful. Popular culture—in its present nature and in its unprecedented social centrality—has evolved to reflect the modern assumption that each individual should be free and encouraged to define reality (and hence to define purpose) for him- or herself. The rise of the entertainment industry as a central cultural power simply reflects its inherent embodiment of the modern project of “doing your own thing.”

In a 1958 essay called “The Emergence of Fun Morality,” social

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¹⁴Ibid., 10
scientist Martha Wolfenstein called attention to signs of a new morality displacing traditional concerns with doing the right thing. The advent of fun morality—and the cultural institutions and artifacts that enabled it—soon meant that not having fun was an occasion for anxiety. As Dr. Wolfenstein observed: “Whereas gratification of forbidden impulses traditionally aroused guilt, failure to have fun now lowers one’s self-esteem.”¹⁵ As this moral inversion has gathered momentum, cultural institutions previously unconcerned with promoting fun gradually succumbed to the assumption that unless they could be entertaining, they would be left in the dust. By the time of the last two or three decades of the twentieth century, numerous cultural institutions—once committed to being sources of moral meaning, definition, and authority—had surrendered. Political candidates felt compelled to appear on Saturday Night Live and on jokey talk shows. University professors emulated stand-up comics. Many clergy supervised the overhaul of worship services to make them more like variety shows. Art museums (and many artists) outdid one another in seeking to make art fun. Journalism—first on TV, then in print—traded depth and moral seriousness for flashy superficiality. The idea of cultural authority and the sorts of limits and disciplines it would promote capitulated to the claim that all of life is market-driven, a claim that makes sense in a purpose-free cosmos.

It’s not that good things couldn’t still happen within these institutions. But they increasingly saw themselves not as exercising authority but as begging for attention. They could no longer articulate “thou shalts” and “thou shalt nots”; they could no longer sustain taboos or offer exhortation about duty and obligation. In short, these institutions effectively abandoned the task of articulating the contours of a purposeful and morally ordered universe within which individuals might seek to conform their souls. Modernity’s sovereign individuals were best understood as consumers, not as disciples, apprentices, or heirs. The advent of fun morality was not simply a displacement of seriousness. It represented the institutional loss of confidence that there was anything worth being serious about. It was (in Allan Bloom’s memorable formulation) the confirmation of nihilism without the abyss.

CHURCH AS CULTURE

Since All God’s Children and Blue Suede Shoes was published, I have watched countless efforts by well-meaning Christians to use the

mechanisms of popular culture to convey the message of the gospel and its consequences. All of these efforts assume (as did Pete Ward in the article I cited at the beginning of this introduction) that the Church has no choice but to adapt to the spirit of the age and its tools. I reject that assumption. In the years since I wrote this book, I have come to appreciate the theological arguments (and the various historical studies) which insist that the Church should properly understand itself as a people: not as a club or a clinic or a show or a service provider, but something more like a nation, a *polis*. The Church is not simply in the business of getting individuals saved. The Church’s task is to nurture and shape its members into disciples, who observe everything their Lord—the Lord of heaven and earth—has commanded. Of course, the Church must be eagerly active to bring in new members. But it must deliberately be a body the membership in which makes a difference. It must offer a way of life—a culture—that is distinct from the world’s ways. And it must seek to baptize its new members into Christ and into his body, which means that they must be exhorted to abandon their old memberships and allegiances.

In a conversation I had several years ago with D. H. Williams—now a professor at Baylor University who teaches the work of the early Church fathers—we talked about how seriously the early Church’s supervision of new converts took this process of enculturating its members. “In the process of teaching or catechizing new Christians,” Williams said to me, “it was taken with great seriousness that the commitment that they were making was a corporate one, and an exclusive one. And that it entailed a body of meaning that in many ways was inviting them to become members of a counterculture, from the one in which they had converted from. And even the catechetical process itself begins to raise important questions about the church as culture. That you are de facto encouraging the new Christian to learn a new vocabulary, a new sense of what is the highest, the good, and the beautiful; that there really are true things and false things; that there really are certain moral lines to be drawn in the sand, and that you may struggle with these, and part of the struggle is very good.”16

Church historian Robert Louis Wilken made a very similar case in an interview given (not, sadly, to me) in 1998 in which he reflected on the early Church’s posture toward its cultural surroundings. Wilken pointed out that the principal way in which the early Church leaders sustained cultural influence was by discipling its members, by conveying to them that

the call of the gospel was a call to embrace a new way of life. The Church was less interested in transforming the disorders of the Roman Empire than in building “its own sense of community, and it let these communities be the leaven that would gradually transform culture.” The Church was not a body that “spoke to its culture; it was itself a culture and created a new Christian culture.”

To speak of the Church as a culture is to use the word “culture” in a thicker way than it is often used today. When Robert Louis Wilken writes of a Christian culture, he is referring to (in his words) the “pattern of inherited meanings and sensibilities encoded in rituals, law, language, practices, and stories that can order, inspire, and guide the behavior, thoughts, and affections of a Christian people.” By referring to “a Christian people,” Wilken is reminding individualistic Americans that the gospel is about the calling of a people, not the making of discrete and separate converts. This view permeates the New Testament; using language that echoes texts in the Torah, St. Peter addresses Christian exiles in Asia Minor (and future generations of Christian believers) this way: “You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light, Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.” Theologian Peter Leithart has picked up on this theme in arguing that “in the New Testament, we do not find an essentially private gospel being applied to the public sphere, as if the public implications of the gospel were a second story built on the private ground floor. The gospel is the announcement of the Father’s formation, through His Son and the Spirit, of a new city—the city of God.”

If this is the case, Leithart argues, then “the Church is not a club for religious people. The Church is a way of living together before God, a new way of being human together.” This was surely the perspective of the early Church, though one wonders how common it is today. The assemblies of believers in the first century and long after were not perceived to be resource centers for the promotion of merely private spirituality; they were not religious branches of the larger Greco-Roman project. Rather,

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191 Peter 2:9–10.
20Peter J. Leithart, Against Christianity (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2003), 16.
the early Church lived with the formative conviction (in Leithart’s phrase) “that God has established the eschatological order of human life in the midst of history, not perfectly but truly.” Therefore, the Church’s life—the shared relationships and practices of the redeemed community—was truly a matter with public consequences. Leithart argues that these public consequences reflect the eschatological character of the Church. “The Church anticipates the form of the human race as it will be when it comes to maturity; she is the ‘already’ of the new humanity that will be perfected in the ‘not yet’ of the last day.” So conversion necessarily led to discipleship that had extensive consequences. “Conversion thus means turning from one way of life, one culture, to another. Conversion is the beginning of a ‘resocialization,’ . . . and ‘inculturation’ into the way of life practiced by the eschatological community.”21

**MERELY A PERSONAL SAVIOR?**

Modern Christianity has largely lost sight of this vision. We assume that our way of life will be substantially shaped not by the gospel, but by the convictions and practices dictated by government, the market, science, technology, and popular culture. Our churches are quite likely to be low-commitment clubs for religious people rather than definitive communities of disciples striving to live all of life under God’s kingship. For many modern Christians, churches are dispensers of eternal security and uplift—fire insurance and mood brighteners—not nurturers of a whole way of life, not the source of the best ways to act and think in all spheres of experience. The message of the gospel is commonly assumed to be personal and private, not communal and public. So many well-meaning Christians believe that the best way for the Church to influence American culture is by imitating as much as possible whatever way of life happens to be fashionable and popular, in the hopes that people will like us and listen to us. What we have for our neighbors is a message about an ethereal eternal life and about coping with frustrations here and now, and so we just need to communicate a message about a short list of values capable of being perceived as relevant to conventional lifestyles. This truncated vision of the Church’s mission is wonderfully American but not very biblical.

Contemporary culture—now largely ordered by the logic of popular culture—has effectively abandoned what it means to be a culture. Insofar as it promotes liberation instead of restraint and self-control, it is (in the

21Ibid.
words of Philip Rieff) an “anticulture.”²² Christopher Clausen has argued that we live in a time of “postculturalism.”²³ My own formulation is that popular culture paradoxically encourages *autoculturalism*—each of us forming a culture of one in which *my* choices are guided by no external forces. Popular culture is thus a contradiction in terms. Whatever it is, it is not a culture in any historically recognized sense.

What cultures have been—and must be—are traditions: ways of life that are conveyed from one generation to the next. For some time I have been musing on the idea that the fifth commandment is an exhortation for the people of God to recognize that, in order to sustain a sense of being a people, they must sustain traditions. Moral philosopher Oliver O’Donovan seems to agree. In a remarkable passage of his book on community, *Common Objects of Love*, O’Donovan correlates the honoring of parents with the sustaining of communal traditions.

The paradigm command of tradition is, “Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land which the Lord your God gives you.” It appears to our eyes to be concerned with the duties of children, but this is a mistake. The duties of children are purely responsive to the duty of parents to be to their children what their parents were to them. This is a command addressed to adults, whose existence in the world is not self-posited but the fruit of an act of cultural transmission, which they have a duty to sustain. The act of transmission puts us all in the place of receiver and communicator at once. The household is envisaged as the primary unit of cultural transmission, the “father and the mother” as representing every existing social practice which it is important to carry on. Only so can community sustain itself within its environment, “the land which the Lord your God gives you.” No social survival in any land can be imagined without a stable cultural environment across generations. By tradition society identifies itself from one historical moment to the next, and so continues to act as itself.²⁴

No political movement, no ideology, no social activists have done more to sever this essential cultural continuity than have the mechanisms of popular culture. As a result, disobedience to the fifth commandment has

become at least as institutionalized by the practices and attitudes encour-
egaged by popular culture as has the breaking of the later prohibitions
against adultery (realized in lust) and covetousness.

To resist the disorientations of popular culture, church leaders and
their followers need to recover a rich theology and practice of the Church
as a people with a distinctive culture. Such a recovery is rarely promoted
by the people most preoccupied with attending to cultural matters; they
seem largely uninterested in criticizing the cultural status quo, especially
what I’ve called the hegemony of popular culture.

CONSIDER THE TURTLE

A large percentage of Christians—especially younger Christians—are
taking more seriously the challenge of “cultural engagement.” Churches,
parachurch groups, Christian media and publishing: all show evidence
of addressing the world outside the Church more deliberately and more
energetically, but not always more wisely. The word “engagement” is one
of those wonderfully multivalent English words. Armies can be engaged,
attempting to kill each other. Gears can be engaged, so that one drives
another. Lovers can be engaged, committed to becoming one flesh. I often
wonder which meaning of the word Christians have in mind when they
talk about cultural engagement.

One of the slogans I’ve repeated in promoting the Mars Hill Audio
Journal is that cultural engagement without cultural wisdom leads to cul-
tural captivity. I fear that many well-meaning believers—eager to share the
gospel with their neighbors and contemporaries—run the risk of becom-
ing as wise as doves and as harmless as serpents. Shaped more than they
realize by the disorders of their culture—especially by the media-inflected
impatience with careful and systematic thought, and by a suspicion of
formality and tradition—they admirably want to be more like Jesus, but
they’re not really sure they want to be more like Paul, Augustine, Aquinas,
Calvin, or Jonathan Edwards. What they are missing, I believe, is an
awareness that the Church can only engage the culture by being a culture.

In 2009, the young art historian Matthew Milliner wrote a percep-
tive piece online about the hipper young Christians who use the vocabu-
lary of being “missional” and “emerging.” He noted that their suspicion
of forms and institutions—which, I might add, they have absorbed more
from popular culture than from Scripture—causes them to reject the idea
of the Church being culturally distinctive. “For them,” he writes, “culture
is as dispensable to Christianity as a hermit crab’s shell is to the crab. The true essence of the gospel might don cultural attire when necessary, but only to just as quickly cast it off, seeking new garb to attract a fresh set of converts.” We should travel light, change often, and stay in tune with the *Zeitgeist*.

But Milliner noted another paradigm of Church and culture:

For others, culture is less easily distinguished from Christianity. It is almost as indispensable to Christianity as a turtle’s shell is to the turtle. A turtle is permanently fused to its habitation by its backbone and ribs; the shell is inextricable from the creature itself. Removing it would rip the animal apart. In its single shell lie a turtle’s protection, distinction, and beauty. This unique relationship to its hardened exterior is what places turtles among the earth’s oldest reptiles—contemporaries of both dinosaurs and us.25

Milliner cited Robert Louis Wilken as a proponent of the turtle paradigm, who argues that forms with longevity are needed to pass the faith on to subsequent generations in its fullness. He also cited T. S. Eliot, who in his essays on Christianity and culture warns that to neglect the transmission of Christian culture is to destroy “our ancient edifices to make ready the ground upon which the barbarian nomads of the future will encamp in their mechanized caravans.”

In light of Eliot’s metaphor, I must confess that, visiting many churches and parachurch gatherings, I am reminded of Alasdair MacIntyre’s observation at the end of *After Virtue*, when he noted that “the barbarians are not waiting beyond the frontiers; they have already been governing us for quite some time.”26 I fear that a good number of clergy and parachurch leaders (especially among those with large followings) have achieved their positions because of their ability to manipulate and manage the mechanisms of popular culture. But they lack the skills or temperaments necessary to exercise wise cultural authority, to train people to observe the fifth commandment and its cultural consequences. It’s not all their fault: that’s what many American churchgoers and the parachurch constituents expect and demand. I hope I live long enough to see this trend reversed.

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26Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 263.
I’m grateful to Crossway for having kept this book in print for such a long time. They have invited me to revise it, but an adequate revision would entail writing a new book. Having reread it, I think this remains a useful introduction to the subject. I’m glad to know that for many readers, it is the first book-length treatment of the topic they have read. I can only hope that for many it is not the last.
ONE

OF THE WORLD, BUT NOT IN THE WORLD

A family moves to a new city. The decision to move was made for financial reasons, the father believing there were much greater opportunities for prosperity in the new location. After they arrive, they discover that the cultural surroundings of their new home are fraught with obstacles for their family’s spiritual well-being. While the economic opportunities are there, the city turns out to be a moral cesspool. Unwilling or unable to relocate, the family suffers horribly, resulting in the death of the mother, the loss of their home as they flee in terror of physical violence, and, eventually sexual sin between daughters and father.

This could be the outline for a sweeps-week miniseries on one of the networks, but this scenario is actually one of the earliest recorded instances of the effects of a culture on the lives of individuals and families. It is, of course, the story of Lot and his family.

We are not told Lot’s thoughts about the culture that destroyed his family. We do not know if he reflected on his earlier decision to move to the cities of the plain, while his Uncle Abram pitched his tents near the great trees of Mamre. While the Genesis account (chapter 19) says very little about Lot’s spiritual life, the Apostle Peter tells us that Lot was “a righteous man, who was distressed by the filthy lives of lawless men (for that
righteous man, living among them day after day, was tormented in his righteous soul by the lawless deeds he saw and heard)” (2 Peter 2:7ff.).

There are many Christians in the twentieth century who sometimes feel as if they have settled in Sodom. A culture that once was dominated by Christian values is now one of the greatest spiritual challenges for American Christians. Once decency and order seemed to characterize the lives of individuals and communities. The institutions they created and the traditions they respected seemed to make American culture more hospitable to Christianity than any culture in history. American society was regarded as a “Christian society.”

Earlier generations of Christians were concerned about “worldliness,” and whatever that meant, it was seen as an aberration in American culture, not its essence. But today most Christians regard their culture itself as an implacable enemy, a constant threat to their own sanctity and to the stability and faith of their families.

More specifically, what is called “popular culture” has been troubling to parents, teachers, pastors, and counselors for generations. The effects of television, movies, popular music, fiction, fashion, and other aspects of popular culture have been debated intensely, if not always intelligently. Much of the attention has been focused on the content of popular culture, especially material that mocks religion, the family, and “traditional values,” and that makes explicit or suggestive sexual appeals.

It has not been uncommon for evangelical Christians to give up trying to come to terms with “secular” popular culture, and to boycott it altogether. But often they have simultaneously endorsed the creation of an extensive parallel popular culture, complete with Christian rock bands and night clubs, Christian soap operas and talk shows, Christian spy and romance novels, and Christian exercise videos. They have thus succeeded in being of the world, but not in the world.

This “Christian” popular culture takes all its cues from its secular counterpart, but sanitizes and customizes it with “Jesus language.” In its crassest forms, it has simply substituted “Christian” language and imagery for elements in the original
version: stealing the Coca-Cola theme, "It's the real thing," and using it to market Jesus ("He's the Real Thing"), for example. One of the earlier instances of this, in the late 1960s, was the rather tame folk-pop musical by Kurt Kaiser and Ralph Carmichael (the Henri Mancini of Christian music), "Natural High," which not only borrowed musical idioms from popular music, but borrowed the much more sinister physiological metaphor of drug-induced euphoria as well. It was brilliant marketing, right? Jesus is kind of like drugs, without the paraphernalia or sleazy pushers. That should appeal to our troubled youth.

STRIVING TO CONFORM TO THE WORLD

The extent to which the principle of "of the world, but not in the world" operates is illustrated by a "Music Comparison Chart" in the book Contemporary Christian Music, by Paul Baker.1 In addition to columns that classify the musical style of the artists in question (Techno-pop, Rockabilly/Nostalgic Rock, Reggae, etc.), Baker includes a column headed "Sounds Like..." So we learn, for example, that Scott Wesley Brown sounds like Barry Manilow, or T-Bone Burnett sounds like Bob Dylan, John Lennon, and/or Roger McGuinn. Jamie Owens-Collins sounds like Olivia Newton-John and/or Juice Newton (but not, we assume, like Wayne Newton). Noel Paul Stookey sounds like (surprise) Peter, Paul and Mary. "The main thing to remember in using the chart is what it suggests," explains Baker. "If you like (or liked) artist 'A' in secular music, then there's a good chance you'll like some of the music of 'B' in Christian music." A small percentage of artists on Baker's chart are marked with an asterisk, which means that "an artist has developed his or her own recognizable sound, often with no direct parallel among the better known secular artists."

Now there's nothing unusual about entertainers who are reminiscent of other, and better, performers. James Coburn reminds a lot of people of a budget version of Lee Marvin, Julian Lennon sounds like his father, the work of film composer John Williams sounds like Gustav Holst or Ralph Vaughn Williams or Richard Strauss or whoever. What is disturbing is that Christian
performers seem at times to achieve popularity because they sound like “secular” originals who are not quite kosher because they write dirty lyrics or bite the heads off of rodents or exhibit severe gender confusion in their wardrobes. It’s disturbing because it seems as if the “good guys” are working very hard to measure up to the standards already set by the “bad guys.” And the reason they professionally need to do this is because their potential audience demands it. After all, they’re listening to the radio like the rest of their friends, and they really do like certain performers, but they know their parents would just really die if they ever figured out what the lyrics were, so like there’s this Christian guy who sounds just like George Michael, only he doesn’t say I want your sex, it’s I want your soul, and it’s really Jesus talking, but it sounds just like George Michael, right? And maybe we can sing it in church.

SELLING SOAP AND JESUS

Overstated? I don’t think so. But is it really wrong? After all, there is nothing new about stealing useful cultural forms and artifacts to serve the interests of the gospel. John lifted the idea for his Logos Christology from contemporary philosophy, Paul quoted pagan poets, and Luther borrowed tunes from drinking songs for hymns. A vocalist named Dave Boyer established popularity a decade or two ago because he reminded his fans of Frank Sinatra or Jack Jones or another fifties-style crooner. If we were in a seminary class on missions, we might call this “sounds like” phenomenon an example of contextualization.

But the key word in this business is useful. How useful is it to borrow a cultural form if that form effectively cancels out the content you’re using it to communicate? There are many instances of some very dubious borrowings in the history of the Church. As missionaries have taken the gospel to new cultures, it has always been tempting to recast the message of redemption in familiar forms. But some of those forms have been inappropriate as vehicles of holy truth, either because they introduced fatal distortion or misunderstanding, or because they were so intertwined with ungodly practices that their affiliation with the
gospel seemed to sanction the very behavior the gospel should have challenged.

More subtly, achieving popularity by "sounding like" establishes a curious pattern for people striving to avoid being conformed to the pattern of this world. The implicit message of such celebrity is that Christians are successful to the extent that they mimic the models established by the world.

Early in the 1980s, the Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN) experimented with a Christian soap opera. CBN hired directors, writers, and actors who had experience in the secular soaps. The scripts had a typical soapy feel to them, the sets and camera angles were stock daytime fare, the music had the same melodramatic feel to it. What was different was the fact that a few of the characters were Christians, who occasionally spoke of the role their faith played in meeting soap-opera crises.

Shortly after the show began production, I spoke with a number of the people involved with the program, asking whether the conventions of soap operas didn't pose some challenges to presenting a Christian message. After all, it was a television genre that depended on the dramatic equivalent of gossip. None of the actors or production staff had given the possible conflict between form and content a minute's thought. One senior figure on the show said it didn't matter if you were selling soap or Jesus; hey, it's called "show business," right? It's all just a matter of using the right techniques to get people to "buy" the product. If you liked secular soap opera villain "A," you'll love our Christian soap opera villain "B," because she gets saved sometime next season. But meanwhile she's just as nasty as her "secular" counterpart.

What's wrong with this picture? Obviously (or maybe not so obviously; none of the people I talked to experienced what the psychologists call cognitive dissonance) the "of the world, but not in the world" strategy is not an adequate way of dealing with popular culture. The thin Christian veneer in such projects very quickly wears away, and what is underneath determines the response of consumers of such products. Such a strategy is a sad reminder that most of the Christian criticism of popular culture has focused on content while ignoring form. A generation after
Marshall McLuhan, the Church still behaves as if the forms of culture, especially the forms of mass media and the role they play in our lives, are value-neutral.

**A FAITH FOR THE COMMON MAN**

Despite the perennial protests over sex and violence on television, lewd rock lyrics, and pornography sold at convenience stores, evangelical Christians remain relatively oblivious to the problems associated with popular culture. This is in part because American evangelicalism has its roots in *populist* culture. Nathan O. Hatch has observed that “the genius of evangelicals long has been their firm identification with people. While others may have excelled in defending and elaborating the truth, and in building institutions to weather the storms of time, evangelicals in America have been passionate about communicating a message.”

Evangelicals have always been partial to (in fact, they may even be defined by their sympathy to) great communicators, from John Wesley and George Whitefield, to Charles G. Finney, Dwight L. Moody, and Billy Sunday, to the greatest communicator of the twentieth century: television.

Popular culture is attractive to many conservative Christians precisely because it is . . . well, popular. It is the people’s culture, and the people are whom evangelicals evangelize. With the overarching demand of the Great Commission looming over every evangelical enterprise, it is very easy to go for ratings instead of rationality, quantity rather than quality. Evangelicals have always been anti-elitist. Not for them the distant authority of a Magisterium or the speculative aridity of academic theologians. Give them instead a rousing pulpiter. As Hatch observes, evangelicals tend to measure “the importance of an issue by its popular reception. By this logic, any position worth its salt will command a significant following. A best seller by definition becomes a ‘classic’; to be read is to deserve to be read.”

The problems with such an attitude were anticipated by Alexis de Tocqueville, who warned of a “tyranny of the majority” in the young democracy, in which truth, goodness, and beauty would be determined by vote. A society that cultivates
commonness, that is suspicious of genius, that has more esteem for the entrepreneur who caters to the tastes of the many than the visionary who challenges the spirits of the few — such a society is always in danger of defining worth in terms of immediate demand rather than eternal significance.

But we are getting ahead of ourselves. We have not heard enough evidence to call for the jury's verdict. Many readers may think I have rushed to judge popular culture too quickly and too harshly. But most would agree that popular culture has some intrinsic problems associated with it. If this is so, such problems will be evident whether they are part of the parallel Christian culture or the original secular version. It could even be that the sanitized clone is even more problematic, since it is assumed to be safe. (After all, "Christian" popular culture influences thousands of church services every Sunday morning. How could anything be wrong with it?) But any criticism of popular culture cannot afford to criticize only the secular variety. Since the forms and the way they are used are virtually identical, any valuable analysis will apply equally well to Johnny Carson and to Pat Robertson, to Linda Ronstadt and to Amy Grant.

Since "Christian" pop culture is something of a parasite on earlier forms, our principal attention will be given to the host. This will require that we understand the roots and the history of popular culture, its relationship to what are sometimes called "high culture" and "folk culture," and its entwining with a number of social and historical phenomena. It will also require that we understand the Biblical and theological criteria for obedient cultural life before God. Popular culture is not a simple, homogeneous abstraction that allows for simple application of Biblical principles. Its challenges and temptations do not confront us like the proverbial harlot whose seductions are clearly to sin, straightforward and simple. It has many dimensions and contours and hidden agendas that require some historical and experiential perspective before we can evaluate it fairly and, having understood it, conduct ourselves in its presence with wisdom.
EVERY GENERATION FACES UNIQUE CHALLENGES.
The first-century Church had Caesar’s lions and the Colosseum. And, while it might seem like an unlikely comparison, the challenge of living with popular culture may well be as serious as persecution was for the saints of old.

Today we witness the tremendous power of pop culture to set the pace and priorities of our lives. We simply cannot afford to be indifferent about culture’s influence—nor can we escape it, glibly condemn it, or Christianize it. Cultural expert Ken Myers helps us to engage pop culture from a historical and experiential perspective so that we can live in it with wisdom and discernment.

“A magnificent and timely book. Fresh, witty, informative, trenchant, and eminently sane, Myers’s book is a must for thoughtful evangelicals.”

OS GUINNESS, cofounder of the Trinity Forum; author of The Case for Civility

“A modern classic on discerning culture from a Christian perspective. Because of its interdisciplinary range, engaging style, and sophisticated analysis, this book is a needed antidote to worldliness, especially in its less detectable and socially acceptable forms. It makes a fine text for sociology, aesthetics, and evangelism courses at the college and graduate levels.”

DOUG GROOTHUIS, Professor of Philosophy, Denver Seminary

KEN MYERS is director of Mars Hill Audio, an organization devoted to helping Christians think wisely about modern culture through a variety of audio resources. Prior to that, he was a producer and editor for National Public Radio and the executive editor of Eternity magazine. Myers is a graduate of the University of Maryland and of Westminster Theological Seminary.