

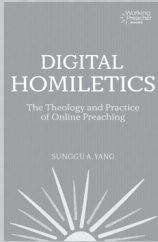
CULTURE MAKING: RECOVERING OUR CREATIVE CALLING

by Andy Crouch, Expanded Edition, Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2023. 314 pages. \$25.99.

How should Christians best engage with, be responsible for, and participate in culture? For several decades now, amid the cultural transition from a Christendom era to a post-Christendom era and the increasing polarization of the culture wars, this question and others like it have animated theological scholarship, pastoral care and proclamation, and dinner table conversations. Some of the responses have been fruitful and godly, others have missed the mark. Initially published in 2008 and now republished in an expanded edition, Andy Crouch's *Culture Making* has continued to be an influential resource to point Christians toward new, and also very old, directions for understanding their calling in culture. *Culture Making* offers readers "a new vocabulary, a new story and a new set of questions" to make the case that Christians must reclaim their God-given identity as divinely created cultivating and creating creatures (10).

In part I, Crouch seeks to offer a new vocabulary to help readers better understand, speak of, and ultimately create and cultivate "culture." For Crouch, culture is what human beings make of the world (23, 73). Instead of focusing on culture in the abstract, the author invites readers to consider concrete and particular cultural artifacts or goods, like river transportation routes, interstate highway systems, and even omelets, to understand how a particular artifact fits into its broader cultural story (29–32). He wants to dissuade readers from speaking of "the Culture" as it neglects the many dimensions of culture (48). "The only meaningful use of the phrase 'the culture,'" Crouch writes, "is embedded in a longer phrase: the culture of a particular sphere, at a particular scale, for a particular people or public (ethnicity), at a particular time" (60). Crouch is also critical of "worldview" thinking, as it assumes a far too analytic and diagnostic approach to cultural engagement and wrongly contends that culture is only changed by thinking and ideas (60–64).

The main thrust of this part of the work is Crouch's argument that Christians should adopt a particular "posture" in relation to culture that is in sync with the Biblical story: cultivation and creativity. Rooted in the posture of cultivation and creativity, Christians can better employ different "gestures" in relation to culture, such as condemning, critiquing, consuming, and copying (84–96). While Crouch is fully aware that culture changes us as much, if not more, than we change it, he emphasizes

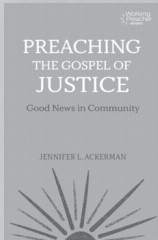


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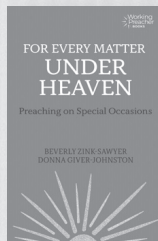
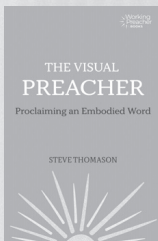
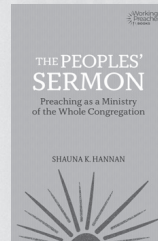
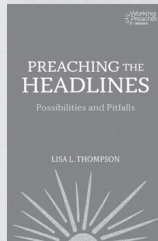
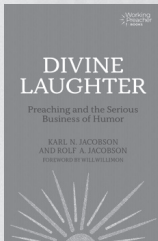


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the responsibility to work to actively create and cultivate alternative cultures because “*the only way to change culture is to create more of it*” (67, emphasis original).

In part II, Crouch seeks to justify his argument from part I by examining a particular cultural good with its radical and wonderful vision of culture: the Bible (101). His goal in this section is to offer a “new way of reading a very old story: the story of culture as told through the pages of Scripture, from its opening chapters to its surprise ending” (11). Beginning from God’s creative work recorded in Genesis 1-2 and God’s creation of humankind in the “image of God,” Crouch seeks to show how, from the beginning, God’s people were divinely tasked with the responsibility of cultivating, stewarding, and tending the garden and all its inhabitants (107–110).

The fall into sin fundamentally destroys and alienates human creatures’ relationship with God, but also their relationship to one another and the culture they create and build together (114–115). This is exemplified in constructing the Tower of Babel in the rebellious city (Gen 11; 115–117). Yet the Biblical story points ahead to a surprise ending: not the return to a garden but the establishment of an eschatological, holy city amid the garden, coming “down out of heaven from God,” a place of perfect and eternal cultural cultivation and creativity (Rev 21:2; 122, 160-174). The rest of this part of the work traces what happens “between Genesis 11 and Revelation 21 that disclose how God will rescue not just human beings but the entire project of human culture from the vanity of Babel” (123). One need not agree with all of Crouch’s Biblical analysis or theological assumptions to see the import, value, and coherence of his telling of the Biblical story in this part of the work.

In part III, Crouch takes up the question of the Christian’s calling in the world. Crouch cautions readers against the phrase and the inclination that their job is to “change the world.” It is not that Christians can’t make a difference, but questions of scale matter (196–197), as does the virtue of humility (200–201). Crouch encourages Christians to think about how they can use power in godly ways in their vocations (227–233) to create cultural goods in small spheres based on personal relationships and intimate collaboration (240), all of which is rooted in God’s grace revealed in the cross (262–263).

Culture Making is a book worthy of picking up and pondering for Christians interested in how Sunday and the rest of the week connect as they are embedded in particular times and places, vocations and families, neighborhoods and communities. I appreciate Crouch’s desire for

Christians to take an active yet humble role in creating culture by producing cultural goods and artifacts rather than primarily embodying more passive and reactionary postures. I also appreciate the high-value Crouch places on the tangible cultivation of beauty and delight through activities like making delicious food with friends and practicing and performing beautiful music. In a culture of total work, commodification, instrumentalization, and automation, cultivating organic practices like making good food and beautiful music are necessary cultural alternatives for our shared human flourishing.

As I walk away from the book, I leave with some questions, such as: “How might the local congregation participate in this cultural creation and cultivation, not just individuals in their vocations?” “What would a sermon sound like that seeks to bring God’s people into the posture of creation and cultivation?” and “What disciplines or practices might be necessary to enable God’s people to embody and be preserved in this posture?” As a result, I am actively pondering and mulling over existing and potentially new cultural goods to create and cultivate with those near me in my own life, family, and congregation to the glory of God and in service to the neighbor.

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