

CULTURE AND GOODNESS

THE GOODNESS OF GOD 3

All kinds of cultural forms can lead us into the goodness of God.



T. M. MOORE

A REVISION STUDY FROM
THE FELLOWSHIP OF AILBE

Culture and Goodness
The Goodness of God 3
T. M. Moore
Susie Moore, Editor and Finisher

Copyright, 2018 T. M. and Susie Moore
The Fellowship of Ailbe

Except as indicated, Scripture taken from the New King James Version. © Copyright 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Contents

Welcome to <i>Goodness in Culture</i>	4
1 Means and End of Culture	5
2 Unity in Culture	7
3 Culture and Holiness	9
4 Harmony and Scripture	11
5 Worship and Order	13
6 Goodness in the Ordinary	15
7 Love, Love, Everywhere...	17
Questions for Reflection of Discussion	19

Welcome to *Culture and Goodness*

As we might expect, much can be learned about the goodness of God by paying careful attention to various forms of culture. Since human beings are made in the image of God, and are prolific makers and users of culture, it only makes sense that at least some of that culture will refract the goodness of God to our delight and benefit.

God can use culture – even that which is created with no intention of honoring Him – to bring a witness to Himself, and to promote His good agenda on earth. The more we are able to discern God’s goodness in the forms of human culture, the more we can imitate what we see there, and fulfill our Kingdom-and-glory callings to do good works unto the Lord.

ReVision studies are designed as brief introductions to the subject under consideration. We hope they will enlarge your worldview, help you to become more firmly rooted in Scripture, equip you to minister to others, and stimulate you to want to learn more about the Word of God and the Biblical worldview.

We’re happy to provide this study at no charge. If you find these studies helpful, we hope you’ll consider sending a gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, to help us in making these resources available to others.

May the Lord bless your study of His Word.

T. M. Moore
Principal

1 Means and End of Culture

*You have ascended on high,
You have led captivity captive;
You have received gifts among men,
Even from the rebellious,
That the LORD God might dwell there.* Psalm 68.18

God in the gifts

This Old Testament text is extremely important, because it establishes a course or trajectory, as well as divine expectations, for the development of human culture from the days of Christ onward. We need such divine guidance where culture is concerned, because culture is essential, inescapable, and good.

Well, not all culture is good; but culture by its very nature can help us to understand and make good use of the good gifts of God.

Paul quoted Psalm 68.18 in Ephesians 4.7, 8, where he was exhorting believers to use all the gifts God has given them through the grace of Jesus and the power of His Spirit. Here's the way Paul puts it: *But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ's gift. Therefore He says, "When He ascended on high, He led captivity captive, and gave gifts to men."*

Now if you were paying attention you will note two differences, one major and one minor, between Paul's use of Psalm 68.18 and the text as it appears in David's psalm.

The Old Testament text says that, upon ascending to the heavens, the Lord began *receiving* gifts from people. The apostle Paul changed the verb to say that the Lord, upon ascending on high, *gave* gifts to men – *all* men. Upon His ascension to the right hand of God, the Lord Jesus Christ, together with the Father, poured out the Holy Spirit among the peoples of the earth and with Him, gave a variety of gifts for people to use in their everyday lives. Calvin explains this change by saying, "Paul intends to shew, that this ascension of God in the person of Christ was far more illustrious than the ancient triumphs of the Church; because it is a more honorable distinction for a conqueror to dispense his bounty largely to all classes, than to gather spoils from the vanquished" (*Commentary on Ephesians*).

The second difference we note in Paul's rendering of this text is the absence of the phrase, "even among the rebellious, that the LORD God might dwell *there*." The absence of this phrase in Paul's usage implies that he accepts it without having to say so. The Lord Jesus has given gifts to people – all kinds of gifts to do all kinds of things, even to people who do not love Him – in order that, in some way, by various means, He Himself might be present in the exercise of those gifts.

God's goal for culture, in other words, is the manifestation of Himself, His glory, and His love. And to the extent that culture does this, culture is *good*.

A witness to the Lord

This lavish bestowing of gifts, even gifts of making and using culture, is not new to the New Testament. Nor is it a new idea that God should use culture to declare something about Himself. God has always been doing this, as is clear from Acts 14.17, where, as we have seen, Paul advised a community of pagan people that gifts of culture, in the form of *agriculture*, had been given to them by God so that the people would see in these wonders a witness to the living God Himself.

The mysteries of sowing, the strenuous work of harvesting, and the joys of consuming the work of one's

Culture and Goodness

hands have been given to all peoples and nations as a way of directing their thoughts to God. God, in a sense, inhabits the culture-making activities of men as the Giver of those abilities, and He intends that those activities should bear witness to Him and His love.

So the *end* for which God gives gifts of culture is so that He might be known, and the culture those gifts produce can be a powerful *means* for bearing witness to the Lord. Christians need to understand this, and to devote themselves, wherever they have presence and influence, to shaping and using culture according to the intentions of God, so that all culture will bear witness to Him.

And this means that we must strive to make, use, and reform culture so that God is known and loved, and that, loving Him, we will love our neighbors as He does, and seek only their edification and wellbeing. To the extent culture can help us in this, it is very good, indeed.

An impossible challenge?

This might seem like an impossible challenge. I mean, how is it possible to use and shape our cultural lives so as to honor God and promote an environment of love?

The apostle Paul, however, is not sympathetic to such balking at our cultural calling. He tells us to do everything – and to use everything – in ways that point to God, honor God, display the character of God, and further the Kingdom purposes of God on earth as in heaven (1 Cor. 10.31).

It must be possible, therefore, and so it remains for us to consider more carefully what achieving a culture expressing the love and goodness of God will require of us.

For reflection

1. What is culture? What is it for? Is it really essential and inescapable? Explain.
2. Meditate on 1 Corinthians 10.31. Eating and drinking – preparing and taking a meal – is a cultural act. How can God be glorified in this?
3. What makes culture good? How can good culture help us to understand and bring to light the goodness of God?

Next steps – Conversation: What are some ways that you can see the presence of the Lord in the cultural gifts of people? Talk about this with some friends. What does this suggest about the ways we use the culture of our own lives each day?

2 Unity in Culture

“All this,” said David, “the Lord made me understand in writing, by His hand upon me, all the works of these plans.” 1 Chronicles 28.19

A vision for the nation

Toward the end of his life, David made preparations for a glorious temple unto the Lord God. He would not himself be allowed to build it, since, as God explained, he was a man of blood (1 Chron. 22.8); but he would draw up the plans, or rather, receive them from the Lord, as he said, “in writing”; and he would cast a vision for this temple, and all that was associated with it, that would motivate the entire nation of Israel to join in the work.

David’s was a comprehensive plan for the worship of God. It described in great detail all that was to be built, how it was to be constructed, and who would serve once the project was finished. The plan was complete and presented a unified vision of the temple precincts and protocols (1 Chron. 28.11-13).

David composed Psalm 68 to cast a vision for the temple, comparing the work of building this temple (vv. 24-27, 29, 35) to Israel’s conquest of Canaan, many years before. He put this vision into a song so that it could be used in worship and singing among all the communities of Israel.

The people of Israel responded enthusiastically. From every community in Israel, people contributed whatever was needed for the project – the buildings, vessels, and priestly garments. Even neighboring pagan nations became enthralled with David’s vision and contributed what they could (1 Chron. 22.3).

The people embraced David’s project as good, and worthy of their support. What was it about this project that made it so desirable for so many people?

Many things, to be sure. But one of the great strengths of David’s plan for the temple was its *unity*. There was nothing extraneous or inconsistent in David’s plan, and nothing that was essential was omitted. Everything necessary for the smooth and glorious working of the temple was accounted for, and everyone in the nation found something of their own to contribute to this very good project.

The first principle of design

[Vermont artist Peter Huntoon](#) understands the importance of unity in cultural compositions. Peter is a delight to watch as he works, as you can see from the [videos on his website](#). He insists, “Unity is, in my opinion, the most important Principle of Design.” However, to watch as he paints, you wouldn’t think unity had much to do with his art.

Peter begins a work by splashing, flinging, and smearing his canvas with various colors. He flips watercolors onto the board with different brushes, then moves the colors around until the whole canvas looks like someone poured a bucket of water over an artist’s palette, and all the colors have run together. Where’s the unity in this?

The unity is in two places: First, it’s concealed within the object of Peter’s work, a live scene, when he’s working *en plein air*, or a photo of a scene when he’s finishing a work in his studio. The unity he’s seeking, and which he will coax out of the scene, is obscured behind extraneous objects, muted in shadows, or awaiting some highlighting, coloration, or placement to cause it to emerge.

His canvas prepared, Peter begins to create the unity he can see in the scene, and which exists in his mind. He works on the details of a scene like [Rochester, Vermont](#) to bring out the beauty in what most might see only as

Culture and Goodness

an ordinary village scene. The unity of color, images, placement, and perspective in a work of art like this is not immediately visible in the object itself; unity begins in the design of the artist and emerges through his skillful use of the tools and materials of his art. And as Peter Huntoon explains, “It’s always a thrill and a happy surprise, when things come together in the end.” That coming together, that *unity*, is what helps to make Peter Huntoon’s art so good for those who delight in his work.

Unity in culture

Unity in culture strikes a welcome chord in our souls. The unity which exists in the Godhead – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, in perfect love, peace, harmony, and joy – is refracted in works of culture that demonstrate balance, wholeness, and appropriateness. A table rightly set, an architect’s drawing, a lawn and garden neatly kept, a carefully prepared business presentation, a college course, a well-crafted poem, a day’s attire, a church unified in love – all these strike us as good and useful.

Works of culture that lack a unifying motif, purpose, or structure, or that throw together random ideas, forms, or images do not satisfy or bring delight as much as a work like *Rochester, Vermont*. And they don’t inspire or move us like David’s vision of the temple did the people of his day.

Unity in culture can be good when it works in combination with other cultural components to give us a glimpse or experience of the goodness that exists in God. As we make and use culture, therefore, we must ask ourselves – whether we’re eating or drinking or whatever we’re doing (1 Cor. 10.31) – how this involvement with the culture demonstrates the unity and glory of God, and declares the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.

For reflection

1. Zoning laws are an attempt by city planners to bring unity to a *community*. Such laws can be very good, indeed. In what ways?
2. The songs we remember and delight in most have a basic unity that holds them together. That unity might be in the chord structure (C, F, G, for example), by virtue of a recurring motif (think of the opening of Beethoven’s 5th symphony) or a repeated refrain, or in some combination of these. Why do we find unity like this so appealing, so good?
3. Cultural unity by itself is not necessarily good. Some culture-makers can create forms with much unity, but which, apart from other aspects of goodness, are actually evil. Think of the highly unified government and military of Nazi Germany. Can you think of any other examples?

Next steps – Preparation: Study some cultural form in your immediate environment – a book or painting, or a piece of furniture, for example. How does this form exemplify unity? Would the form be as appealing to you if it had no unity? Why or why not?

3 Culture and Holiness

And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, "Speak to all the congregation of the children of Israel, and say to them: 'You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy.'" Leviticus 19.1, 2

*Help, LORD, for the godly man ceases!
For the faithful disappear from among the sons of men.
They speak idly everyone with his neighbor;
With flattering lips and a double heart they speak...
The words of the LORD are pure words,
Like silver tried in a furnace of earth,
Purified seven times.* Psalm 12.1, 2, 6

Holiness

Perhaps the most important of the divine attributes is holiness. The Triune God is thrice-holy, that is, holy in all His Persons, and altogether holy: "Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, Who was and is and is to come!" (Rev. 4.8) The holiness of God marks Him as completely separate from everything else, for nothing else is holy as God is holy – pure, good, true, and unchanging in all His Being and attributes.

And yet this holy God commands His people to be holy, just as He is holy. This does not suggest that we can ever attain to holiness in the same way that God is holy. Even in the new heavens and new earth, the holiness we will possess there will be first, the holiness of Jesus, and second, always incomplete, as we will continue to increase in Christlikeness for all eternity. So great is the holiness of Christ that though we can know it, we can never fully attain it, but only ever experience and refract it according to the limits of our creatureliness.

And this is true not only for how we shall be in eternity, but for our experience here and now. We can both experience and express the holiness of God, as the Spirit of God uses the Word of God to restore the image of God in us, transforming us increasingly into the likeness of Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 3.12-18). Thus it is crucial, as Paul emphasized, that we should strive to improve in holiness, and to bring holiness to completion in the fear of God (2 Cor. 7.1).

And this means even our use of culture can accomplish the purposes of holiness, by separating us from the wickedness, impurity, and immorality of the times in everything we do (1 Cor. 10.31). Even our most ordinary, everyday engagements with culture – language, dress, work, diversions, table manners, and all the rest – can raise a banner for holiness unto the Lord.

A literary example

We can look to the ways other Christians have used culture to learn how we may be a people holy unto the Lord in our own cultural activities. The late Russian novelist Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn provides an excellent example of one who devoted his writing to shining the light of truth, goodness, dignity, and, yes, holiness into the grey, bleak, deadening and deadly culture and society of Soviet Russia. Though this generation of believers has largely ignored or forgotten Solzhenitsyn's work, he remains a shining example of faith working through love, pointing the way to holiness.

Solzhenitsyn devoted his literary work to celebrating the dignity of man amid the oppression and lies of a political system he insisted was diabolic in all its ways. In his novel, *Cancer Ward*, we meet real men, men with names and families, men who are dying amid a culture that is dying, and whose disease is but a microcosm of an entire society which is a cancer ward all its own. *Cancer Ward* is a lamentation for a life of truth, beauty, goodness, and love, that had been buried under the rubble of political oppression and lies.

The Gulag Archipelago honors the memory of millions of nameless *zeks* – inmates of Soviet forced-labor camps – who died under the oppressive regime of Marxist thugs. This is the book that brought Solzhenitsyn to the attention of the West, and earned him the Nobel Prize for literature, and expulsion from his beloved Russia.

And his own personal struggle to pursue art, meaning, dignity, and truth in a culture of lies and death is admirably portrayed in his biographical work, *The Oak and the Calf*. Solzhenitsyn and his work were condemned by the Soviet Regime, and he took up residence in the United States, before returning to Russia shortly before his death.

The way of holiness

Two excerpts from Solzhenitsyn’s writings can help us appreciate the power of culture to establish the ground of moral and spiritual truth. Each of these provides insight to Solzhenitsyn’s heart, vision, literary skill, and resolve; and each can encourage us in our own use of culture, that in all things we might be a people set apart for the Lord. Each calls for a truth and holiness in life, not unlike what we see in Psalm 12.

The first example is from Solzhenitsyn’s lecture upon receiving the Nobel Prize in 1972. In his peroration, he declared his convictions about the power of art, and applied them to the lives of ordinary people, who must stand for truth and goodness wherever and however they can: “The simple act of an ordinary man is not to participate in lies, not to support false actions! His rule: let *that* come into the world, let it even reign supreme – only not through me. But it is within the power of artists and writers to do much more: *to defeat the lie!* For in the struggle with lies art has always triumphed and shall always triumph! Visibly, irrefutably for all! Lies can prevail against much in this world, but never against art.”

The second example is from the speech, “A World Split Apart,” delivered at the Harvard commencement services in 1978. It amounts to a thinly veiled call for repentance and revival: “We cannot avoid reassessing the fundamental definitions of human life and human society. Is it true that man is above everything? Is there no Superior Spirit above him? Is it right that man’s life and society’s activities should be ruled by material expansion above all? ...It will demand from us a spiritual effort; we shall have to rise to a new height of vision, to a new level of life where...our spiritual being will not be trampled upon, as in the Modern Era. This ascension is similar to climbing onto the next anthropological stage. No one on earth has any other way left but – upward.”

Solzhenitsyn’s work shows us how one man’s commitment to spiritual truth and holiness can change the world. And it challenges us to consider how we, in all our cultural endeavors, might bring the goodness of God to light, through holiness, in all our relationships, roles, and responsibilities.

For reflection

1. How would you define holiness? Do you think holiness is much prized in our society today? Explain.
2. Why is holiness inextricably linked with truth? Can we be holy without being people of the truth? If the truth of God’s Word dwells in us richly, how should we expect His holiness to be refracted through us? In what areas of our lives, and in what ways?
3. Can holiness become a more defining feature of our world without revival? Explain.

Next steps – Transformation: Would you say that Solzhenitsyn’s “simple act of an ordinary man” defines the way you live? What steps can you take that will make this more true in your life?

4 Harmony and Scripture

Then He said to them, "Therefore every scribe instructed concerning the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who brings out of his treasure things new and old." Matthew 13:52

The pleasure of harmony

Harmony, as an important aspect of the goodness of culture, is so widespread and common that we take it for granted. Harmony expresses balance, blending, appropriateness, concord, and good taste. We hardly think about the many ways that harmony appears in all aspects of cultural life. We seek it implicitly – in how we dress, keep our homes, appreciate our music, balance our lives between work and rest, manage our diet, and in every other way. We recognize that things *in*harmonious are just not right, at least, not what we enjoy. We avoid disharmony and seek harmony in nearly everything we do.

In his [comic composition, "No One's Perfect,"](#) Allan Sherman demonstrated how important harmony is to our cultural experience. When his choir strikes an unharmonious note, we wince, and the audience laughs, because we know such disharmony is not the way it's supposed to be. It is not without clear purpose that the most unharmonious song in the musical [Les Mis, "The Bargain,"](#) is sung by that most disharmonious couple, the Thenardiers. On the other hand, the intricate, complex, and amazing harmonies of Johann Sebastian Bach are such as bring glory to God (*solī deo gloria*) in every generation, as he prayed they would.

Harmony is just a part of who we are, and the various kinds of harmony – and disharmony – we encounter in our culture can have edifying or stultifying effects. Harmonies of various kinds foster peace and a sense of wellbeing, while disharmony creates unrest or irritation. Disharmony is disquieting and disconcerting, while harmony brings matters to a point of resolution and satisfaction. We seek the one, because of the peace and pleasure it affords, while we eschew the other, or at least, suffer it only as long as is necessary.

Harmony and the Bible

It's not surprising that the Bible embodies harmony and balance like no other book or cultural artifact in the world. The unity and harmony of Scripture are captured in Augustine's well-known quip, "The New is in the Old concealed, and the Old is by the New revealed." Old and New Testaments create a balance of divine revelation, of fall and restoration, promise and fulfillment, anticipation and realization, longing and hope.

Moreover, among the books of the Bible a glorious harmony of genre, voices, themes, and styles constitutes a symphony of divine revelation that makes the Bible the living and powerful blessing it is (Heb. 4:12). We will delight in the Bible more as we appreciate the different literary forms in which it is communicated, the subtle differences in themes and emphases, and the style of each inspired writer. Reading the poetry of Scripture – which is considerable – is not the same as reading an epistle of Paul. The histories of the Old and New Testament demand a different approach to reading and study than the prophetic or apocalyptic literature. The story of God's covenant has a different aspect with Abraham than with David or Jesus.

But all these forms, genre, and themes work together, under the leading and teaching of the Holy Spirit, to help us discover the profound beauty and goodness of Scripture, to understand its teaching, and to appropriate its lessons. The Spirit, like the conductor of a masterful symphony, draws from spiritual teaching throughout the Bible to create the enduring and multi-faceted harmonies that make reading Scripture such an ineffable delight and joy (1 Cor. 2:12, 13; Jer. 15:16).

The Bible is the supreme cultural example of how harmony can reveal the goodness of God, Who lives in perfect harmony within and among Himself. As we learn to appreciate the harmony of Scripture, we will grow in our adoration of and commitment to God, and we will discover ways of bringing more harmony into our own cultural experience as well.

Harmony in the everyday

The fact of harmony communicates something about the goodness of God. Harmony is delightful, satisfying, and fulfilling. The more harmony and balance feature in our use of culture, the more we will bring the goodness of God to light in the land of the living.

This is a challenge for all aspects of our cultural experience, beginning with our approach to Scripture. Do we read all of Scripture? Do we seek to compare parts of Scripture with one another, to gain the fuller picture of truth God intends? Do we seek Jesus throughout Scripture, and all the various harmonies of the Bible completely resolved in Him? Do we meditate and reflect on the harmonies of the Bible, letting them resonate with our harmony-seeking soul, and shape our lives for harmony and goodness throughout?

Our lives will touch others for harmony or disharmony, for pleasure and edification, or for discord and offense. Our conversation, all our outward manners and demeanor, how we do our work or keep our homes, what we appreciate in music, film, literature, and art, and how we manage our relationships: All these have potential to portray the kind of harmony that exists in God and His Word, and to bring that harmonious sense of goodness into the experience of the people around us.

For reflection

1. Give an example of a harmony that gives you particular delight – whether a song, story, part of the Bible, article of *couture*, or example from sports. What is it about this example that gives you such pleasure?
2. What kinds of things strike you as *unharmonious* in another person? Do you see any of that in yourself? How can we avoid becoming sources of dissonance, discord, and irritation to others?
3. Spend some time reflecting in prayer over a day in your life. Can you see any areas where you might bring more harmony into your relationships, roles, and responsibilities?

Next steps – Conversation: Talk with some Christian friends. What do they find harmonious in their lives? Why do they enjoy such harmonies? How can Christians help one another make more harmonious use of culture?

5 Worship and Order

*“These things you have done, and I kept silent;
You thought that I was altogether like you;
But I will rebuke you,
And set them in order before your eyes.”* Psalm 50.21

Let all things be done decently and in order. 1 Corinthians 14.40

Upside-down

One of the most popular attractions in touristy Pigeon Forge, Tennessee, is WonderWorks™. WonderWorks™ is a large upside-down house, which looks like it has been picked up by a huge storm, flipped, and dropped on its roof in the middle of the town. Go inside, and everything is upside-down there too. The floors are where the ceiling should be, and you walk on the ceiling among chandeliers, upside-down doorways and furnishings.

WonderWorks™ is chock-full of fun family activities – games, experiments, experiences of various kinds, 3D films, and many other diversions. Just about any time you go there, it’s packed. People love WonderWorks™ – at least as a place to visit. But no one would want to live there. It’s a place for good, clean family fun, but it bears no resemblance to the real world, and no real-world people would want to call it home.

Happily, we leave our WonderWorks™ experience at WonderWorks™ because the fun we have there doesn’t *have* to relate to life in the real world. It’s just some place to go for wholesome diversion. Not some place where you expect to live, and around which you intend to order your life.

A lot like the way many Christians do worship.

The worship of God in many churches is upside-down. It’s out of touch with God and with the real world, no place anyone would want to live, certainly not something you can take with you day by day, but generally, a lot of wholesome fun while we’re there.

That’s all well and good. Except that this is not what worship is *for*. As the most important aspect of cultural life, employing many other supporting cultural activities, worship in many churches today has been stood on its head. It may be fun, and lots of folks may be there each week, but it’s not what God is seeking in the place He promises to meet us.

Not like us

I can already hear the dissenters insisting, “But we *love* the worship at our church, and so do our friends!” Good. We should love to worship God, and everything we do while we’re together worshipping Him.

But too many churches plan their worship from the wrong starting-point. They ask, “What will our people find enjoyable, meaningful, and fun in worship?” Or, “What will bring in our lost neighbors, for whom *traditional worship* has lost its meaning?” Everything proceeds from there. Change the lighting, improve the seating, add a band and a drama troupe, keep the preaching folksy and anecdotal, add a few surprises and a jumbo screen, and *voilà*, worship that everybody loves.

But what if God doesn’t love it? What if God isn’t *like* us, and what if He prefers an approach to worship that doesn’t just flow from our or our culture’s preferences? What if His worship has *forms* and a *pattern* that *He Himself prescribes*, and that, as in Psalm 50, He comes seeking each time His people gather for worship? What if God has an *order* for worship that must be learned, indeed, *mastered*, and diligently and faithfully practiced if

we are to realize the purpose for which God has instituted such worship?

Much of contemporary Christian worship is upside-down. It's clever and contemporary, and there's lots to do and lots of fun for everyone. But it's the sort of thing you leave behind when you're done, rather than continue to live in day by day, as Paul commands (Rom. 12.1 2; 1 Thess. 2.12).

God, order, worship, and culture

God is not a God of chaos. He's not a God of fun, although we can know unbounded joy in worshiping and serving Him. God is not like us – silly, frivolous, spiritually shallow and confused, inclined to please only ourselves, and sure we know better than God how we ought to do culture.

But since worship is the most important cultural activity anyone can engage, it simply does not make sense that God would leave us to our own designs or whims to create forms of worship designed, in the first instance, to please *us* rather than to serve Him. And in fact, He has not. There is a divine pattern and order for worship, and, as we see in Psalm 50, no matter how many external forms or gimmicks we employ in the name of worship, if we don't get that pattern and order right, beginning in our hearts and lives, then we can expect that God will reject our worship, no matter how much we enjoy it. Because, after all, worship is all about God, not about us.

If we will not submit to the divine order for worship, but insist on being led by our preferences and whims, then what hope do we have of submitting to His ideas about order in culture, or morals, or relationships, or spiritual life? The only order we will ever prescribe on our own, for ourselves, is the order of the moment, whatever makes us happy or satisfies some passing whim. Only order as God prescribes it can bring deep and lasting meaning, and God-honoring glory, to all our cultural lives, beginning in the way we worship God week by week and day by day.

For reflection

1. What are some of the elements of the divine order for worship? How should these be arranged or ordered for worship?
2. How can submitting to the divine order for worship help to ensure that the rest of our cultural lives will follow His ideas about order as well?
3. Why is *order* in life preferable to *disorder*? Is the same true of worship? Where shall we learn the proper order for worship?

Next steps – Transformation: What are the key components of the worship of God? Meditate on Romans 12.1, 2. How can you bring more worship into the order of your life each day?

6 Goodness in the Ordinary

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form, and void; and darkness was on the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters... Then God saw everything that He had made, and indeed it was very good. Genesis 1.1, 2, 31

From ordinary to very good

It is instructive that the creating work of God took six days. It didn't have to, after all. God could have spoken the creation into being whole, complete, and very good in a single word. But He didn't. He chose to employ a process whereby He made something out of nothing by changing formless matter from darkness and void, through addition and adornment, to a unified, varied, harmonious, and very good thing.

When God began His work of creating, the world was just stuff, without color or variety, dull, dark, and dreary, empty and lifeless. But God acted on the ordinariness of creation and transformed it into a cosmos of beauty and goodness; and He Himself, the supreme Good, pronounced it *very good*.

Made in the image of God, human beings share a genius for creativity, for making something out of nothing, so to speak, for bringing out the goodness in ordinary, everyday situations and things. We are creative creatures, but creativity is a learned art; it doesn't come naturally to us. And in the creative activity of humans, in all kinds of cultural fields and activities, forms of goodness appear that can bear witness to the goodness of God. The creative work of others can encourage and instruct us to use the culture of our lives to bring more of the goodness of God to light in the land of the living.

Out of nothing, something good

Artists have a knack for making something out of nothing. They have mastered the skills of creativity relative to their art and use them deftly to show us goodness where we might otherwise never notice it. We've seen how an artist like Peter Hinton can envision a thing of unity, beauty, and goodness in what most of us would regard as a rather ordinary scene. And not only envision it, but *create* it. This is what artists do. Baroque composer Antonio Vivaldi saw in the seasons of the year a *Wunderkammer* of beauty and goodness. He captured the familiar – and too often ordinary – sights and sounds of each season in four concerti, each uniquely composed to express the mood, colors, and activities of a different season of the year. *The Four Seasons* remains a favorite of many music lovers.

The poet Gerard Manley Hopkins was a master at observing ordinary things and, by describing them in his unique verse style, bringing out their inherent beauty and goodness. A bat circling a lamp, a pebble splashing in a well, a trout swimming beneath his feet, a plover gliding past his eyes, or the face of a stranger could ignite Hopkins' creative spark and lead him to forge a poem of lasting beauty and goodness.

One of my favorite examples of creativity making something out of nothing is Paul McCartney's song, "Penny Lane." Here is a most unusual pop song, in that it masterfully employs all the resources of pop music, but offers none of the focus we tend to associate with the genre. Here are no sentimental or passionate expressions of love or loneliness, no angry rants against The Man or his institutions, no celebrations of drugs and sex, and no merely giddy expressions of fleeting fun. "Penny Lane" is a work of homage, a walking tour of a place that was important to Paul McCartney in his childhood and youth. In a [2009 interview with ClashMusic](#), McCartney explained, "'Penny Lane' was kind of nostalgic, but it was really a place that John [Lennon] and I knew; it was actually a bus terminus. I'd get a bus to his house and I'd have to change at Penny Lane, or the same with him to me, so we often hung out at that terminus, like a roundabout. It was a place that we both knew, and so we both knew the things that turned up in the story." McCartney describes everyday sights in an ordinary part of an ordinary city, using his extraordinary gifts of creativity to lead us to an experience of goodness and delight.

McCartney's poetry and instrumentation create sights and sounds that put Penny Lane in our ears and in our eyes. Further, McCartney draws from other eras of music to lend dignity to the composition and theme. He employs a "walking bass" foundation to the song, a device familiar to baroque composers like Vivaldi, but which also evokes the feeling of walking around the barber shop, the fish and chips store, and the roundabout on Penny Lane. He also employs a Renaissance trumpet to create continuity between his pop composition and his English musical heritage. Thus, by addition and adornment, McCartney creates an experience of goodness and delight from his memories of an ordinary place.

Many people would say "Penny Lane" is a very good song. And we can agree, but we must not stop there. It is not likely that Paul McCartney intended to honor God by celebrating the goodness of his home town, or by crafting a work of cultural goodness to delight audiences of every age. However, with the apostles Paul and James, we insist that whatever goodness is embodied in Paul McCartney's creativity comes from God, and should lead us to turn from considerations of earthly and temporal goodness to the goodness of God, from Whom all good and perfect gifts come (Jms. 1.17).

Shining God's goodness

All such expressions of goodness in works of culture bear witness to the goodness of the Lord, even when those who are the source of that goodness neither intend nor acknowledge His goodness in them (cf. Acts 14.17). When we experience goodness, we know delight, and this can have a powerful and positive effect on us. And such encounters with goodness can point us to the goodness of God as well, as the apostle Paul did with the people of Lycaonia. Similarly, when we *use* culture – especially everyday, ordinary cultural things and activities – in ways that refract the goodness of God, we shine His goodness on the people around us, and create opportunities for bearing witness to God, Who alone is Good (Matt. 5.13-16).

Most of us would perhaps say that we live ordinary lives. We aren't artists, poets, or composers. How can we bring anything of goodness into the lives of the people we see each day? Yet we are all made in the image of God, and therefore we all have the ability to make something out of nothing in our lives. By seeing God's goodness in everyday situations and things, and developing our creative abilities, we can bring the goodness of God into the land of the living in even the most ordinary cultural activities of our lives. And that will be a very good thing, indeed.

For reflection

1. What makes a person creative? What can we learn from God's creativity to help us be more creative in everyday ways?
2. What's the difference between eating and drinking and eating and drinking to the glory of God? Which has more potential to bring out the goodness of God? Why?
3. "Culture" is simply what we do with the things and situations of our lives. And all our cultural activities can shine with the goodness of God. Suggest some ways you might improve in using all your ordinary cultural activities to glorify God.

Next steps – Conversation: Talk with some Christian friends about what makes for a good use of culture – a 1 Corinthians 10.31 use of culture.

7 Love, Love, Everywhere...

“Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one’s life for his friends.” John 15.13

And hardly a drop to drink

I don’t think you’d get an argument if you suggested that culture can be a powerful vehicle for communicating ideas about love. For many people, when they think about culture, they think *pop* culture, and pop culture is filled with songs and films and TV programs extolling the virtues of love.

But the form of love presented in pop culture reminds me of the ancient mariner’s lament: “Water, water everywhere, and not a drop to drink.” What passes for *love* in much of pop culture is an adulterated, debased, and corrupted form of the love that exists within the divine Trinity. The love celebrated in pop culture tends to be self-centered, sensual, and only fleetingly satisfying. We don’t hear much in pop culture about the kind of love that leads someone to lay down his life for his friends, much less for his enemies (Rom. 5.10).

In the culture with which most people are familiar, a kind of Gresham’s Law of love has become established. Just as bad money tends to drive out good money, leaving the currency debased and the economy weak and vulnerable, so bad forms of love have nearly driven out the kind of self-denying love that refracts the love of God and brings His goodness to light in the land of the living. Consequently, ours has become a world of narcissists and pragmatists who will stop at almost nothing to get the “love” to which they consider themselves entitled.

But just as culture can corrupt our understanding of love, so it can renew that understanding as well. And when it does, contrary to what we might expect, the appeal can be enormous.

Exhibit 1: Les Miserables

Consider the musical *Les Miserables*, which premiered in Paris in 1980, and continues drawing sell-out audiences in venues all around the world. Victor Hugo’s story of tragic love during a revolutionary period in 19th century France provides a powerful example of how culture can encourage a true understanding and practice of love.

In *Les Mis*, the kind of “love” celebrated in much of contemporary pop culture – sensual and self-centered – is depicted in scenes that are dark, dreary, and even deadly. Also, as at the inn of the Thenardiers, their love is shown to be grasping, greedy, and frankly, gross, although it is robed in the garments of hilarity.

Similarly, Javert, the antagonist in the plot, is so devoted to principle, and to his own view of what is right, that he is haughty and ruthless, and is ultimately self-destroying. All forms of self-love, merely sensual love, and “love” that preys on or takes advantage of others are resoundingly denounced in *Les Mis*, especially against the backdrop of the more God-like forms of love Hugo’s story portrays.

The primary story lines in *Les Mis* present a truer and more desirable picture of love – that which ennobles and edifies others, even at the cost of one’s own wellbeing. Such self-denying love is God-like and forgiving (as seen in the priest and Valjean), risks one’s own security and wellbeing to do what is right for others, and can lead to happiness in marital love, and the hope of eternal blessedness. In one scene, as Valjean sings a prayer, pleading for God to spare the life of a young man, his voice strains to the highest points in the register, reaching up to God – Who in the film version, looks upon Valjean, in an overhead painting of the all-seeing eye. As Valjean lies dying, he is visited by Fantine, who has preceded him into glory, and who sings reassuringly, “To love another person is to see the face of God.”

Les Mis overwhelms us with its wholesome and edifying statement of what it means to love another person

Culture and Goodness

truly, selflessly, and enduringly. Audiences can't get enough of its beautiful music, powerful characters, and tragic but ultimately transcendent story. It is the all-time, highest grossing, musical production, and shows us that, when we use culture to pluck the chords of God's image in the souls of those around us, people respond favorably, and will look to us for more.

Give a cup of love

There is a lesson here for all of us in the power of culture to affect the people in our lives. To the extent that we are able to show the love of God in our cultural activities, we may expect to find receptive souls, happy for a touch of selflessness, compassion, concern, and care. The love of God can come through our conversations, hospitality, generosity, and work. It will glow in the ways we relate to others, make time for their concerns, and put our own interests second to those of everyone else.

"Love never fails," the apostle Paul reminds us (1 Cor. 13.8). But it doesn't just happen. Loving others through our use of culture does not come naturally to us. We must look to Jesus to see love in action and to learn how we, learning Jesus, can show Jesus' love to the people around us in all we do (Eph. 4.17-24; 1 Jn. 2.1-6).

What passes for "love" in the minds of many people does not slake the thirst for real love that pleads for satisfaction from the depths of their souls. The world needs great draughts of the kind of love that exists within the Godhead, and this is evident by the way it clamors to drink of depictions of such love through various forms of culture.

Each of us has a cup of love that we can extend to the people around us (Matt. 10.42). The more consistent we are in offering this refreshing draught, the more opportunities we will have to tell others about that Fount of Every Blessing Who causes rivers of living water to overflow from our souls to theirs (Jn. 7.37-39).

For reflection

1. Have you seen or read *Les Miserables*? What examples of self-denying love come most to your mind from this work?
2. Meditate on 1 Corinthians 10.31. How can a meal be a platform for sharing the love of Jesus with others?
3. What are the greatest obstacles to your using the culture of life to show Jesus' love to others?

Next steps – Transformation: Be alert to the opportunities for discerning God's love in other aspects of culture. Can you think of some examples? How might you use one such example to begin a conversation about the love of God?

Culture and Goodness

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. Why should we expect that culture can teach about the goodness of God?
2. What are some aspects of culture that speak to you about the goodness of God? Can you give some examples?
3. How can we make paying attention to culture for what it teaches about the goodness of God a more consistent part of our spiritual lives?
4. How can the goodness we see in culture help us to grow in love for God? In showing His love to others?
5. What's the most important lesson you've learned from this study? How are you putting that lesson to work in your life?

For prayer:

The Fellowship of Ailbe

The Fellowship of Ailbe is a spiritual fellowship in the Celtic Christian tradition. Our goal is to promote revival, renewal, and awakening, following the teaching of Scripture and the example and heritage of our forebears in the faith.

The Fellowship of Ailbe offers many opportunities for training, prayer, personal growth, and ministry. Visit our website at www.ailbe.org to learn more.

We hope you found this study helpful. If so, please consider making a gift to The Fellowship. You can contribute to our ministry by using the contribute button at the website, or by sending your gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, 19 Tyler Dr., Essex Junction, VT 05452.

Thank you.