

Culture Making: Recovering Our Creative Calling **By Andy Crouch**

InterVarsity Press, 2008. 285 pp.

Reviewed by David W. Gill www.davidwgill.org

Andy Crouch is a writer and editor in the world of *Christianity Today* and *Books and Culture*. He is a musician and worship leader, a long time youth- and college student-minister, and a Pennsylvania-based husband and dad. Crouch comes to the questions about Christianity and culture, it seems to me, from the standpoint of a minister (and dad) wondering about how to deal with dancing and movies, how much worldly music style to borrow for youth groups, etc.. That is the practical “feel” of the book.

But Crouch certainly doesn’t stop at any surface level. He draws deeply and thoughtfully from the Reformed tradition of thinking about culture. He has great insights on Francis Schaeffer and the Jesus People Movement vis-à-vis culture thinking. It would be difficult to find a better, more thoughtful study of all these topics and concerns than Crouch has provided. He really does take it to the next level, as we say today.

Crouch says that his purpose is to point Christians toward a better way of understanding of their calling in culture. “What does it mean to be not just culturally aware but culturally responsible? Not just culture consumers or even just culture critics, but culture makers?” (p. 10). He wants to provide three takeaways: (1) a new vocabulary for thinking and talking about culture, (2) a new and better way of reading the biblical story as guidance about culture, and (3) a new set of questions to help guide our discernment about our calling in relation to culture.

In Part One, Crouch works on defining and explaining what culture is. He considers and sets to the side some contemporary but partial definitions of culture in terms of (a) the (high) “culture” of music and art, (b) the (low or mass) culture of fads and trends, (c) the ethnic/cultural identity particularities, and (d) the underlying ideas, beliefs, and values of our broader culture (as in “culture wars” etc.). Crouch defines culture not just as ideas but as artifacts; culture is “what we make of the world” in terms of specific describable products and in terms of the meaning we make of it all (and meaning and stuff are related of course). It’s about making something – and making sense. Culture is a collaborative rather than individual phenomenon, Crouch argues. We all live in multiple overlapping cultures of course. Our family and household are a culture which we can influence to an extent that we cannot usually achieve in the culture of our geographic region or political nation.

Cultural change takes time and patience. It is partly cultivation (of what exists) and partly creation (ex nihilo – something new). It is sometimes important to respond to culture with a “gesture” but we need to be sure that our longer-term “posture” is thoughtful and not just the result of a gesture that thoughtlessly atrophied into a posture. Interesting language and perspective for sure.

In Part Two, Crouch provides what I think is the most valuable part of the book – a careful and very challenging and insightful re-reading of the Bible from Genesis to Revelation from the standpoint of what it suggests about human culture and God’s purposes. Everything from making clothes of fig leaves to the tower of Babel to Israel’s nation-building, Jesus’ activity, and the apocalyptic vision of Revelation is re-viewed. This would make for fascinating discussion among almost any group of Christians.

Finally, in Part Three, Crouch raises the questions about changing culture and about the calling of Christians in relation to all of this. He cautions against looking for and valuing only large scale immediate change – which may in any case turn out to be superficial and ephemeral. He discusses exodus and resurrection as the two paradigmatic stories of God bringing change to a fallen culture --- and presses us toward the conclusion that faithful engagement with culture should take us toward empowering the powerless (and perhaps confronting the powerful). He points out that two-thirds of American philanthropy goes toward institutions that serve the rich --- “essentially the wealthy underwriting their own cultural experiences with the benefit of a tax deduction” (p. 209). But note this as well: “When God acts in culture,

he uses both the powerful and the powerless alongside one another rather than using one against the other” (p. 209).

Strategically, Crouch talks about “the 3, the 12, and the 120” --- based on Jesus’ pattern of (a) Peter, James, and John as his intimate colleagues, (b) the twelve disciple/apostles, and (c) the post-resurrection group of 120 in Acts chapter one. Rather than lusting after star-status and big numbers, make a difference where you are on that kind of scale, Crouch says. This was the strategy that changed the world back in the first couple centuries. It is no different since then.

My own work with business organizations and ethics places a huge emphasis on culture. I think of “culture” as the group/collective counterpart to what we mean by “character” on the individual level. It is describable in terms of core “values” but the values/culture phenomenon may be accidental or out of alignment. Every group has a culture but not necessarily a strong or healthy or thoughtful one. It is difficult to change cultures but the best strategy is to start with identifying (and choosing) the sort of mission and vision that will inspire, motivate, and even require cultural change for its accomplishment. So the essential starting point for culture analysis and change is mission/purpose analysis and change --- whether for a family, a neighborhood, a business, a congregation, a nation, or the world. What are the core values required to accomplish this mission with excellence and success? How can we embed those core values in all four aspects of the culture: (a) its physical infrastructure and artifacts, (b) its organizational policies, structures, and practices, (c) its individual personnel, and (d) its informal rituals and traditions. As I work with organizations we go through four processes: (i) we figure it out: what are the core values required by our mission, (ii) we communicate and train: let’s be sure everyone knows and understands our core values; (iii) we implement: every core value must be visibly, measurably expressed at all four levels of the culture, and (iv) we evaluate and self-audit all of the preceding to make sure it actually is happening.

As a Christian I have been studying the Beatitudes for decades as what I believe is the preeminent account of the “core values” of a subculture that could truly salt the earth and light the world. I love the challenge and insight that Crouch’s book has added to this mix but my guess is that in the end we should still think in Beatitudes terms as we do our painting or write our film scripts or build our businesses or organize our schools and churches. The most powerful starting point for cultural engagement is (a) to be part of a band of brothers and sisters sitting at the feet of Jesus and (b) reminding each other that being humble, teachable, “poor in spirit” servants is the absolutely essential starting point for any kind of faithful and effective presence in our world. There is no other way.