POPCULTURED
Thinking Christianly About Style, Media and Entertainment

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Author of Imagine and The Gospel According to the Beatles
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Introduction

We’ve Been Popcultured

My church runs a course for new Christians called “Christianity Explored,” which is designed to establish them in the faith. The evenings begin with a meal, followed by table discussions and a talk. Those who graduate usually go on to take a follow-up course called “Discipleship Explored,” which takes them into deeper study of the Bible. I’ve been privileged to lead table discussions at both courses and found it constantly challenging to prepare myself for new questions from new people, many of them with almost no background in Christian theology.

My personal interest for many years has been popular culture, and after taking part in the courses mentioned I idly wondered what a course called “Exploring Popular Culture” would look like. I wondered this because I think family, friends, work and popular culture (or leisure activities in general) are where the rubber of our theology hits the road of our ordinary lives. Lessons learned from theology shouldn’t (but often do) remain in the area of theory. They should be evidenced in the way we treat friends and neighbors, earn our money, watch movies, read books and listen to music.

For most of my life I’ve not only consumed popular culture but also I’ve helped make some and have interviewed many people from the worlds of music, film, comedy, fashion, television, art, poetry and
literature. At the same time I've tried to make sense of it all through a Christian understanding. The twentieth-century Swiss theologian Karl Barth reputedly told his students, “Take your Bible and take your newspaper, and read both. But interpret newspapers from your Bible.” That accurately sums up what I have tried to do in my work.

*Popcultured* has been another part of that journey. Although it's designed to help others, it has also helped me because it has forced me to stare hard at different aspects of popular culture, read extensively and search the Scriptures for those nuggets of truth that may have evaded me. Rather than starting with a fixed thesis (other than the thesis that God has something to say about every area of life), I've discovered new things as I've gone along.

The title playfully reflects what I think has happened to us. We may not be so bold as to claim to be cultured, but most of us are to some degree or other popcultured. Popular culture, or “pop culture” as it's often referred to, suffuses our lives. The opening ceremony of the 2012 Olympic Games in London was testament to how much we now identify ourselves by the popular culture we create and consume. In 1948 the opening ceremony London summer Olympics used only military bands. The most spectacular event was a twenty-one-gun salute and the release of seven thousand pigeons. In 2012, $42 million was spent on a three-hour ceremony held together by different forms of rock music and designed to impress the world.

In a popcultured age it made sense to have the evening designed by a movie director, Danny Boyle, and to showcase the work of actors, dancers, performance artists, sculptors, clowns, storytellers, comedians, musicians and DJs. There were references to the high culture of Shakespeare and Elgar, but the emphasis was on pop culture: James Bond and Harry Potter, the Beatles and the Sex Pistols, *Chariots of Fire* and the inventor of the World Wide Web, Tim Berners Lee.

This has been the first book I've written whose chapters I've sent out for review before finishing the manuscript. This was because I'm aware that I'm not an expert in many of the areas covered and I needed assurance that I wasn't way off-beam. That doesn’t mean that my
mentors have approved everything in the book. All opinions, and therefore all mistakes, are mine alone.

My good friend Bobette Buster, who is a Hollywood story guru, script consultant, lecturer and screenwriter, read the whole book and then spent time discussing it page by page with me on Skype. I value the time she gave to this project. Jeremy Begbie, Thomas A. Langford Research Professor of Theology at Duke Divinity School and a renowned expert on art and theology, read the first three chapters and made kind and considered comments.

Rebecca Ver Straten-McSparran, director of the L.A. Film Studies Center, read my chapter on film and discussed her views with me over a meal and then by email. I completely reworked the chapter as a result of her wise and informed comments. Nev Pierce, editor-at-large for Empire magazine, also read the chapter and emailed me with useful suggestions.

My friend Mark Joseph, author and CEO of MJM Entertainment Group, and Robert A. Case, founding director of the World Journalism Institute in New York, read the chapter on journalism. I haven’t yet met Bob Case in person, but he was kind enough to tell me that the Institute had my book Imagine: A Vision for Christians in the Arts on its reading list and that he thought my chapter was good because he agreed with it.

Cliff Richard, one of Britain’s longest-serving pop stars, gave my celebrity culture chapter the thumbs-up, as did Patty Heaton, star of Everybody Loves Raymond and The Middle. Patty also shared with me some of her experiences of dealing with fame as a believer. Rosie McConkey of Siren Design, Angela Buttolph, editor-at-large for Grazzia magazine, and Ali Hewson, co-founder of EDUN Clothing and NUDE Skincare, read my chapter on fashion. I showed the chapter on sensation to Dave Carlson, executive director of Opera-Matic in Chicago (“bringing moving visual art to the streets”) and to Willie Williams, U2’s stage and lighting designer for the past thirty years (as well as for David Bowie, the Stones, Lady Gaga, REM and others). Both made valuable comments.
I got extensive feedback on the comedy chapter from renowned British stand-up Milton Jones, American writer and performer Susan E. Isaacs, and TV writer/producer Dean Batali (That ’70s Show, Buffy the Vampire Slayer). Some of their comments were so pertinent that I ended up dropping them into the revised chapter.

The advertising chapter I showed to Tony Neeves, a man who forsook the world of commercials to work for charities and is now vice president of international development for Compass International. I also showed it to Adrian Reith, producer of radio jingles and owner of The Jungle Group Ltd.

Kevin Kelly, cofounder of Wired magazine, author of What Technology Wants and founding board member of the WELL, perused my chapter on electronic technology and assured me I was on track (or maybe assured me I wasn’t off-track). Photographers Chris Dyball from California and Donata Wenders from Berlin reviewed the chapter on photography and were both very reassuring with their comments. Steve Taylor, musician and now film director (Blue Like Jazz), gave me a report on the chapter that looks at how Christians are portrayed in movies and on TV.

At the end of each chapter I’ve listed questions suitable as discussion starters, relevant books and websites and some practical suggestions. The books and websites don’t all represent my viewpoint, but they cover the same ground and might be worth researching. It was sometimes hard to suggest a plan of action because I was aware that my readers will range from people who are still at school to serious practitioners of the arts being discussed.

Howard and Roberta Ahmanson helped me by arranging a grant through Fieldstead and Company to buy me valuable research and writing time. They were similarly generous when I was writing my earlier book Imagine: A Vision for Christians in the Arts, and I salute their kindness and their faith in the arts and culture. They never asked to see a manuscript before publication and had no say whatsoever in the actual writing of the book.

My hope is that Popcultured will help those trying to navigate the
sometimes-choppy waters of popular culture with the aid of Christian truth. It’s far from the final word on the subject, but I hope that it stimulates study, discussion and thoughtful consideration. Above all I hope it promotes understanding and enjoyment of the areas covered and that readers will feel excited about their potential both as consumers and creators.
There are a lot of books available that teach people the basics of the Christian life. There are resources that explain who God is to people who are merely curious about Christianity. There are courses on how to read the Bible, how to pray, how to explain the gospel to others, how to resist temptation and how to follow Jesus. There are classes that instruct people in the “deeper things” such as fasting, meditation, waiting on God and spiritual disciplines.

This book is different. It may involve reference to many of the above ideas and practices but it’s essentially about how we can be faithfully Christian while participating in and perhaps even creating popular culture. In the third century the church father Tertullian famously asked, “What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem?” meaning, what has biblical faith got to do with secular learning, or what has the gospel to do with philosophy? Today we might ask, What have Hollywood, Silicon Valley, Madison Avenue, Burbank or Times Square got to do with Jerusalem? In other words, what has popular culture got to do with the Christian faith? I think it’s an important question to ask for ten reasons.

The Divided Mind
The first is that many Christians still ask the question assuming that the
correct answer is “They have nothing to do with each other” (which, incidentally, was what Tertullian expected and wanted to hear). They may say this because they believe in separation, that Christians should keep a distance from all that’s “worldly.” There are clearly many verses in the Bible that tell us to avoid bad company, to resist the devil and to retain a Christian distinctiveness. The issue is, how do we apply these commands in relation to popular culture? Many Christians over the years have concluded that the most effective way is to abstain. They’ve ignored fashion, refused to watch movies, kept their homes free of television and some have even banned novels and newspapers.

Or they may say this because they have divided minds. The divided mind has a spiritual side and an earthly side. The spiritual side is engaged on Sundays and during times of Bible reading and prayer. The earthly side is activated when pursuing leisure activities. There are Christians today whose consumption of popular culture is not markedly different from the consumption of their nonbelieving contemporaries, and, more worryingly, their views of what they’ve seen, heard or read likewise seem to be no different. They evaluate a band, computer game or film as “good” or “bad” using the same criteria as their secular counterparts.

The Christian with the divided mind and the Christian who believes that “come out from them and be separate” (2 Cor 6:17) means avoidance of popular culture are usually poles apart theologically—as far apart as an Amish farmer from Pennsylvania and an emerging-church worshiper from California—but they both result from the same process, an avoidance of discrimination. The separatist usually deals with popular culture by issuing a blanket ban; the divided Christian, by a blanket acceptance. They both avoid the hard task of being simultaneously critically and spiritually engaged.

**Not to Be Taken Seriously?**

The second reason to ask the question is because people often make popular culture with the intent of altering perceptions. I hear people justify uncritical consumption on the grounds that what they’re
watching, reading, playing or listening to is “just a laugh” or “shouldn’t be taken seriously.” They think that to evaluate what they’re being fed involves too much effort and goes against the spirit of entertainment. They say that they don’t want to be overly serious or get too “heavy.” Some people believe that popular culture is best imbibed when the mind is fully switched off. They watch films as if the moving images had as much moral content and power as crashing waves or trembling leaves.

This attitude seriously underestimates the intelligence and the motivation of those who create popular culture. These creators aren’t children doodling with crayons. Predominantly they are trained people with a deep knowledge of their chosen art form and its history. They tend to be highly opinionated people with a vision of the world that they are keen to express. There’s something about the status quo that irritates them and they want to put it right. Sometimes they are people who enjoy subversion—reeling people in with wholesome looking entertainment and then zapping them with a message that runs counter to expectations.

Some directors, producers and writers are quite upfront about how they want their films or TV programs to change attitudes. They realize, for example, that dramas and soaps are more effective mind-changers than documentaries because viewers get involved in the internal conflicts of characters they’ve come to love. They recognize that the public is more effectively persuaded through emotions than intellect. Campaigning organizations often lobby the makers of soaps to include their concerns in future story lines in order to promote their message to a wider audience. *EastEnders* actor Michael Cashman planted the first gay kiss on British primetime TV in 1987, leading to a storm of protests. “Public taste has to be developed,” was his explanation. “Public opinion has to be led. And television and the media are central to that.”¹

The great poet T. S. Eliot believed that the culture we consume just for fun, with no thought of grappling with heavyweight theses, has the most effect on us. He thought this was true precisely be-
cause of the fun element. When we think something is relatively frivolous we disable our critical alarm systems and thereby allow influences to enter undetected. George Orwell had a similar view. In his 1939 essay “Boys’ Weeklies,” which looked at British comics, he asked the question “To what extent do people draw their ideas from fiction?” His answer was, “Personally I believe that most people are influenced far more than they would care to admit by novels, serial stories, films and so forth, and that from this point of view the worst books are often the most important, because they are usually the ones that are read earliest.”

The novelist Graham Greene believed that we are profoundly affected by the books we read as children: “Early reading has more influence on conduct than any religious teaching.”

Comedians recognize that laughter can soften an audience up and make it easier for people to entertain views they might normally reject or be offended by. George Carlin said, “Once you get people laughing they’re listening and you can tell them almost anything.” He expanded on this idea in a 1998 interview:

Most of the time, when you talk to people about, let's call them “issues,” okay? People have their defenses up. They are going to defend their point of view, the thing they're used to, the ideas that they hold dear, and you have to take a long, logical route to get through to them, generally. . . . But when you are doing comedy or humor, people are open, and when the moment of laughter comes, their guard is down, so new data can be introduced more easily at that moment.

This realization doesn’t imply that all readily available culture is insidious, just that it has a habit of bypassing our scrutiny because it gives us warm feelings. When we suspect that culture has an agenda, we are naturally more guarded. When we think that it’s only there to tickle us, we roll over and start purring. The Bible, insistence on vigilance presupposes that we are vulnerable to spiritual corruption when not alert.
The Gift of Culture

A third reason is popular culture is a great gift to us and we should therefore take it seriously. It's impossible to imagine a human society without culture. It's a significant expression of our humanity that distinguishes us from animals. We could easily drink out of a plain clay pot, but our instinct is to shape and embellish it with color and pattern. A lot of what we refer to as culture is shaping and embellishing of this sort. We shape tales of events into stories, sounds into music. We embellish plain walls with murals and make our hair go in directions that nature never thought of.

Theologians talk of God’s instructions to Adam to reproduce, farm the land and name the animals as the “cultural mandate.” Indeed, the word cultivate, which we most commonly associate with plowing, weeding, sowing, pruning and harvesting, has the same root as the word culture. Our culture, at its best, is another way of tilling, planting, rearing and gathering in. We break up the hard soil of our rational minds, plant beautiful ideas, rear the imagination and gather in more fully rounded human beings.

Culture should enhance our lives. It very often serves to relieve us of the cold, hard facts we have to deal with in our working lives and delivers us into the world of fantasy, myth and dream. “Art washes away from the soul the dust of everyday life,” said Picasso. Poems and plays and paintings can show us connections between things that we would never have discovered through ruthless logic. Songs and music help to bring people together and make us aware of the vastness of what it means to be human.

Popular culture is also a healthy forum for debate. New ways of living are explored, new philosophies are floated and new attitudes are tested. It was largely through popular music—rock music in particular—that the alternative views of the 1960s were articulated and explored. The songs and the opinions of the musicians were analyzed, challenged and criticized in other media. Indeed it’s hard to discuss the youth revolt of the decade without reference to artists like the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, Bob Dylan, Jimi Hendrix and The Who.
The Lord of All Life

A fourth reason is that the Christian view is that Christ is the Lord of all life. That is the definition of discipleship. He wants us heart, mind, strength and soul—the total package. That means that there is nothing we experience that Christ doesn’t have a claim on and doesn’t have something to say about. Yet sometimes we treat him as though he wouldn’t really understand some areas of our modern lives, such as popular culture. How could the Ancient of Days possibly keep up? Without meaning to, we treat him like a deaf and partially sighted old man who is so out of touch with contemporary culture that we think we’re doing him a favor by not bothering him for an opinion.

The fact is that if Christ is Lord of all of our lives, then there must be a Christian way to enjoy and make popular culture. We will never know the mind of Christ in its totality, but part of the adventure of discipleship lies in trying to discover as much of it as we can. I would love to sit with Christ and ask him what he thinks of the music of the Beatles, the films of John Ford or the art of Picasso. The Beatles made Revolver, but God made John Lennon, Paul McCartney, George Harrison and Ringo Starr. Picasso painted Guernica but God fashioned Picasso. I think that art can delight or offend God, but it can never surprise him.

The Bible has many injunctions to glorify God in all aspects of life. Paul wrote, “So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God” (1 Cor 10:31). Eating and drinking are two of the most basic survival requirements. Other than in the cases of dietary laws, the avoidance of gluttony, the feeding of the hungry and the receiving of bread and wine in the Eucharist, there would seem to be no obvious connection between meals and religion. Yet Paul thought that consuming food and drink could be done in a glorifying way, and therefore, we must deduce, it has the potential of being done in a less than glorifying manner. If the “whatever you do” is broad enough to cover food and drink, it’s certainly broad enough to cover popular culture.
The Pervasive Influence

A fifth reason for asking the question is because most of us spend a good proportion our lives having our thoughts prompted by popular culture. Through the day we may watch the news on TV, check out social networking sites, buy new clothes, read a newspaper or magazine, read ads, tweet or text, or play an online game. In the evening we may watch a TV drama, soap opera, reality show or talent show, spend time on the Internet, read a book or listen to music. On the weekend we may watch a movie, go to a play, dance, skateboard or attend a concert.

Any guidance we have on living or thinking as a Christian has to take into account popular culture because we spend so much time in the sphere of its influence. It’s hard to argue that the Bible is a source of guidance when dealing with such areas of life as money, marriage, family, relationships, work, worship and prayer but has nothing useful to say when it comes to culture.

What we call popular culture is a natural result of increased leisure time, higher earnings and more luxury. Britain’s Office for National Statistics reported that in 2010 Britons were spending nine times as much on recreation and culture as they had done in the 1970s. Will Galgey, managing director of trends consultancy The Futures Company, commented, “It’s a big shift from material goods to experiences . . . our consumption is about how to enhance our experiences even in the context of our own homes.”

This shift is borne out in personal experience. My grandfather worked on a farm as a teenager and went to bed exhausted at night. On Saturdays he had to walk a round-trip journey of twenty-four miles to sell cattle. His only entertainment was a German-made music box that rotated tin discs, an accordion played by his father and some cheap sensational newspapers of the late Victorian era. My parents had dance bands, magazines, movies, gramophones, comics and early forms of radio. I had TV (but not until I was a teenager), transistor radio, record players and paperback books. My children have had computers, the Internet, iPods, iPads, computer games, satellite TV,
DVDs and iPhones. In just over a century my family’s consumption of popular culture has increased dramatically.

The filmmaker Paul Schrader has estimated that the average thirty-year-old media-savvy person today has seen around 35,000 hours of “audio-visual narrative,” including everything from movies and soap operas to cartoons and YouTube clips. This person’s father, at the same age, would have only seen 20,000 hours, his grandfather 10,000 hours, and his great-grandfather 2,500 hours. “We are inundated by narrative,” he said of today. “We are swimming in storylines.”

When *Rolling Stone* polled its readers in 2010, it found that they spent 11.5 hours a week listening to music, 7.9 hours watching TV, 4.4 hours social networking, 3 hours reading magazines and 2.8 hours playing video games. That adds up to over a day a week immersed in popular culture. Almost 95 percent of those polled said that music was “extremely or very important” in their lives. When asked what form of entertainment they would keep if they could only keep one, 64.7 percent said “listening to music” and 17.1 percent said “watching TV.”

**Signs of the Times**

A sixth reason is that popular culture can be a useful indicator of the Zeitgeist, the “spirit of the times.” Anyone wanting to be alert to changing attitudes and trends in belief would be wise to pay attention. It’s a place where society airs its hopes and uncertainties. It’s where people attempt to win others to new ways of thinking. It’s where possible futures are tried out. Cultural studies pioneer Stuart Hall has said that popular culture is a site where “collective social understandings are created.” Fashion designer Alexander McQueen said of his work, “I’m making points about my time, about the times we live in. My work is a social document about the world today.”

The Canadian communications guru Marshall McLuhan recognized in the 1940s that the much-maligned mass culture of the day provided a unique insight into the collective consciousness. In his 1951 book *The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Man* he ana-
lyzed the assumptions behind advertisements, newspaper layout, book of the month clubs, crime comics, strip cartoons, westerns, Tarzan, Superman and Coca-Cola. He said,

Our hit parade tunes and our jazz are quite as representative of our inner lives as any old ballad is of a past way of life. As such, these popular expressions, even though produced by skillful technicians, are a valuable means of taking stock of our success or failure in developing a balanced existence.11

The cartoonist Jules Feiffer once said, “To know the true temper of a nation’s people, turn not to its sociologists; turn to its junk.”12

The journalist who best understood this in the 1960s was Tom Wolfe, a New York-based observer who expertly highlighted the connections between changing belief systems and the way people were dressing, behaving, talking and consuming. Where previous generations of writers may have focused on the behavior and attitudes of royalty, the aristocracy or the social elite, Wolfe looked to popular culture because he believed that it was here that the most significant social changes were being revealed. What happened in the coffee bars and nightclubs today was going to affect America tomorrow.

In the introduction to his 1965 collection of journalism, *The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby*, Wolfe challenged those who ignored popular culture or who thought it was a bit beneath them:

Stock car racing, custom cars—and, for that matter, the jerk, the monkey, rock music—still seem beneath serious consideration, still the preserve of ratty people with ratty hair and dermatitis and corroded thoracic boxes and so forth. Yet all these rancid people are creating new styles all the time and changing the life of the whole country in ways that nobody even seems to bother to record, let alone analyze.13

The contemporary American stock market analyst Robert Prechter asserts that popular culture (“popular art, fashion and mores”) accurately reflects the dominant public mood and that the changes of
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mood anticipate financial trends. When the mood is buoyant, as it was in the 1920s and 1960s, confidence in the market goes up. When the mood is downbeat, as it was in the 1930s and 1970s, confidence in the market evaporates. Prechter therefore uses close analysis of “music, movies, fashion, literature, television, popular philosophy, sports, dance, automobile styling, sexual identity, family life, campus activities, politics and poetry” to help him make his predictions.

In his frequently quoted essay “Popular Culture and the Stock Market,” Prechter says,

If mass mood change is indeed the cause, and its manifestation a visible indicator, of coming social events, the evidence of mood change is the single most important area of discovery for those who wish to peek into the future of social events. In the world of popular culture, “trendsetters” and the avant-garde must be carefully observed since their ideas are often the expression of the leading edge of the public mood.14

Isn’t it to be expected that Christians should have a similar appetite for gauging the public mood? One of the most frequently made criticisms of the church is that it’s completely out of touch. While it isn’t the job of the Christian community to mimic the secular world or to alter its message to conform to contemporary tastes, it is its job to be familiar with a culture’s hopes and fears, to engage with it and to speak in a relevant way. Jesus challenged the Pharisees and Sadducees over their inability to read the times. He said, “You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times” (Mt 16:3).

The church would have been far better prepared to meet the challenges of the 1960s if in the 1950s it had been reading the mimeographed magazines of the Beat generation poets, listening to the songs on the jukeboxes and paying visits to the coffee bars and jazz cellars of Paris, London, New York and San Francisco. Everything that was to come was already there in embryo form. The future was being rehearsed in popular culture. As Paul Simon reminded us in “The Sound
of Silence,” one place to look for prophetic utterances is on the walls of subways and tenements.

**Insights into Minds**

A seventh reason is that *because popular culture is a place of debate and negotiation, it gives us examples of how our contemporaries are thinking*. Surely in order to love our neighbors as ourselves we will give their views respectful and thoughtful consideration. The best biblical example of this approach is when Paul makes a speech on the Areopagus, a small outcrop of rock close to the Acropolis popular at the time for speakers and debaters.

It’s significant that Paul headed to the place where the latest ideas were kicked about. He could have holed up in the house of a believer and asked them to invite guests over, but instead he went to the city’s cutting-edge philosophy forum. Once there he looked around at the statues erected to various gods and read the inscriptions. He wanted to get a sense of the competing worldviews that were already familiar to his audience. In our language he wanted to gauge their mindset. When talking he made reference to what he’d seen and also quoted (favorably) from poets that reflected their views. He used the culture of the Athenians as a walkway to their imaginations.

We do well to know the popular culture of our times because there we have the stories, the poetry and the idolatry of our times. It makes sense to illustrate a point by appealing to dialogue from a film, lines from a song or comments from a popular culture icon, because they’re familiar to the contemporary audience. These examples establish a common ground for discussion. The space in people’s brains that would once have been filled with stories from the Bible and verses from hymns is now full of stories by screenwriters and lines from lyricists.

When we do this we also make the point that the message of the gospel isn’t that everything you’ve known up to now is wrong and all your culture is worthless. Profound truths about all of life are available to all people. Think of the films, poems, novels, songs and music that have provided you with insights and you’ll find that the majority will
have been the work of people outside the Christian faith. God gives understanding to all people. The gospel rearranges many things we already know, supplies a different framework and adds a different conclusion. The philosopher Epimenides was right to say that in God we live and move and have our being (Acts 17:28), but Paul says that if this is so we shouldn’t think of God as an idol made of gold, silver or stone.

**Entering the Conversation**

An eighth reason is that unless we first pay attention to popular culture, we have little chance of successfully contributing to it. To join in any conversation we first of all have to listen to it and familiarize ourselves with the argument and the language being used. When we’re up to speed we can add to the debate. We know what the pressing issues are, we know what arguments have been put up so far, and we recognize the tone.

We’ve probably all experienced the embarrassment of someone trying to use popular culture without understanding the vocabulary. There were Christian “beat groups” in the early 1960s that adopted the instrumental line up of the Beatles but performed songs that were no more than speeded up hymns. They may have looked (almost) like the real thing, but they lacked authenticity because they weren’t addressing the hot issues of the day or employing the accepted vocabulary of pop.

**Truth Is Truth**

A ninth reason is that God can address us through popular culture. He can use songs to encourage us, movies to deepen our understanding of ourselves, biographies to inspire us, television to educate us, journalism to inform us. We are able to pray in a more compassionate way because of news gatherers, marvel at creation more deeply because of nature photographers, feel less isolated because of songwriters, build more communities of like-minded people because of the Internet.

Truth is truth whoever may say it, and because people are made by God they can’t help discovering and passing on truth. It may be mixed
in with falsehoods—it's our job to work it out—but we must revere truth whenever we encounter it. Even people who announce that they hate God will pronounce truths because it's impossible for anyone to operate on 100 percent lies. We're free to disagree with God but we're not free to live outside his universe.

God will use these truths to nudge, sensitize, awaken and embrace us. I can think of a minister who was helped through a period of depression by the music of U2 and a journalist who came to faith as the direct result of a painting. The Beatles played a part in my own pilgrimage. This is not to suggest that songs should be elevated to the level of Scripture or that visual meditations should replace sermons and Bible studies, but simply to point out that if we ignore popular culture we could be ignoring a channel through which God makes himself known.

The actor Patty Heaton makes the point beautifully:

As far as worshiping people for their talent—of course we musn't. But there are people whose artistic talent is so enormous that even if they are narcissistic or whorish or drug addicted or materialistic, their talent nonetheless points to the greatness of God, even if they cannot see it themselves. The beauty of Christianity is that we can enjoy the blessings God has bestowed upon nonbelievers. In the play/movie Amadeus, the Christian Salieri is tortured by Mozart's God-given talent, incensed that God would bless a whore-mongering lush with such talent, while his pious self churns out the 1700s version of elevator music. God is no respecter of persons and blesses whomever he chooses. Fortunately we can all reap the benefit!15

**Cultural Theory**

A tenth reason for Christians to ask the question is because **people who don't accept spiritual realities are responsible for most of the serious academic exploration of popular culture.** When the spiritual is neglected, “reality” is reduced to the drives for sex, power and money. I don't mean to infer that these people have got everything wrong. I've
benefited from all their points of view, but I’m left feeling that something vital has been overlooked. Structuralism believes it’s all down to language and signs; Marxism reckons capital, class and ownership are the deciding factors; feminism thinks gender politics are crucial; queer theory looks for the sexual subtext; postmodernism pins everything on the collapse of grand narratives.

What seems remarkable (given our Christian heritage) is that none of the leading schools of cultural theory in the West start with a biblical view of humanity or even seem to consider a spiritual dimension, and none of the key theoreticians has been religious. If Christians got involved in such scholarship they could raise questions that aren’t currently being asked and add a disquieting voice to the ongoing debate. It would be nice to think that future textbooks surveying all the cultural theories currently on offer would be forced to appraise distinctly Christian contributions.

These are some of the important reasons why I believe that Christians should equip themselves to understand, enjoy and participate in popular culture. Correctly dealt with, I believe that popular culture cannot only enlarge our experience of what it is to be human but can strengthen our faith through reminding us of forgotten truths, challenging our assumptions, forging connections with the world around us and forcing us to think about the practical application of our faith. Feeling the world as others feel it can be a healthy check on our temptation to be arrogant or self-righteous.

**Questions for Reflection or Discussion**

- Can you think of a song, film or TV program that changed your attitude about something important?
- What examples of drama and comedy that had a background agenda can you bring to mind?
- What would you need to give up if you were to remove all pop culture from your life?
• Think of a time when popular culture brought much-needed relief or consolation to you.

• God requires that we love him with heart, mind, strength and soul. What activities do you associate with each of these dimensions?

• Calculate roughly how many hours a week you spend consuming some form of popular culture.

• What is the most significant form of popular culture in your life? Compare and contrast it with what preoccupied your parents and grandparents at the same age.

• Do you think it is accurate to say that pop culture gives us an insight into the most important concerns of the era we are living in?

• Can you think of attempts by Christians to use popular culture that have left you feeling embarrassed? In retrospect what was it about their attempt that made you feel that way, and what could have been done better?

• Bring to mind examples of popular culture that you believe God has used in your life, and try to understand what it was that made it effective for you.

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**Useful Books on Culture by Christians**


**Websites Dealing with Issues of Christianity and Pop Culture**

Plugged In: www.pluggedin.com

Two Handed Warriors: www.garydavidstratton.com

Bully Pulpit: www.bullypulpit.com

Dick Staub: www.dickstaub.com

**Five Suggestions for Action**

- Join or form a group where you can discuss what you’re watching, reading or listening to.

- Be aware of what people are consuming by reading the top-ten lists of bestselling records, downloads, books and movies.

- Look out for and read interviews with prominent culture creators so that you become familiar with their views of the world.

- Read a wide selection of reviews so that you can choose your culture carefully.

- Check out free lectures, debates and performances that are frequently listed in local events magazines and websites.