

Cultivating Culture

There are many cultures in the world. Studying and understanding them can be fascinating and eye-opening. Every culture shapes the way people think, speak, eat, worship, and live. But before we evaluate the cultures around us, we must understand the culture we ourselves have chosen.

The word *culture* comes from the Latin *cultura*, meaning “growing” or “cultivation,” from *colere*: “to tend, cultivate, or worship.” In Middle English it meant the cultivation of the soil. Later it came to mean the cultivation of the mind and manners. The root idea of culture is cultivation.

What is the root word of Culture? *Cult!* It carries a negative meaning. A cult forms when devotion shifts from truth to a person, from Scripture to tradition, from Christ to culture. Culture is meant to cultivate growth. A cult demands loyalty. If we think of culture as something we cultivate, something that grows, then we understand it must be tended carefully. What we cultivate will shape us.

Consider the example of a food culture, like yogurt or cheese. By itself, a bacterial culture may taste bitter and seem insignificant. Yet it is an essential active agent. When added to milk, something remarkable happens. The culture transforms the substance. It produces something nourishing, valuable, and even delightful. But the culture alone is not the finished product. It must be added to something. It must work within something. It must cooperate with other ingredients.

In the same way, Christian culture by itself can be incomplete, even bitter or unbalanced. But when Christ is added, when His Spirit works within a people, something beautiful is formed. A food culture must be continually fed in order to remain active. If a yogurt or sourdough culture is left unfed, not introduced to fresh milk or flour — and placed in a cold environment, it becomes dormant. It may still exist, but it no longer produces transformation. It preserves its form, yet it lacks power. Likewise, a church culture that is not continually fed with fresh truth from Scripture can grow inactive. If it is kept in a cold spiritual climate, where passion for Christ fades and routine replaces relationship, it may maintain proper tradition, but it ceases to produce spiritual growth.

Consider also how a proofer works in baking. Proofer provides the right environment, warmth, controlled humidity, and time for a culture like yeast or sourdough starter to activate and expand. Without that proper environment, the culture cannot do its intended work. In the same way, Christ must be the “warmth” of our culture. The Spirit of God creates the right conditions for faith to rise and mature. If our churches create an environment that is warm with truth, humility, and love, the culture will help believers grow. But if the environment is cold, rigid, or disconnected from Christ, even a good culture can remain dormant.

The Bible tells us clearly: “ *[God] hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth, and hath determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation; That they should seek the Lord, if haply they might feel after him, and find him, though he be not far from every one of us:*” Acts 17:26–27

All nations. One blood. God established times, boundaries, cultures, languages, and regions for one purpose: *that they should seek the Lord*. Culture was never meant to replace God. It was meant to lead people toward Him.

Many believers can say, “I left one culture for church culture.” Perhaps we left a worldly environment, a lifestyle, or traditions that did not honor God. That is good. Scripture calls us to transformation. But we must be careful. Did we leave culture for Christ, or did we simply trade one culture for another? If our church traditions, preferred music styles, dress standards, or loyalty to a certain leader become our primary identity, we may be promoting culture more than Christ. If we reach people from different backgrounds and the Bible is not open, if Scripture is not shown and explained, then we may be promoting our Mennonite culture rather than teaching the truth found in God’s word. The Gospel transcends culture; it does not depend on it.

When ministering to those from different cultural backgrounds, humility is essential. Paul wrote: “*There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.*” “*Where there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision, Barbarian, Scythian, bond nor free: but Christ is all, and in all.*” Galatians 3:28, Colossians 3:11

The early church faced enormous cultural divides Jew and Greek, Roman and barbarian. They had a hard time trying to mix their old culture with this new one. The Jews and Greeks had to work out how to focus more on this new Faith than the old ways. Yet in Christ, we all have an opportunity to be saved! When people from different cultures mix, we should be respectful of each other’s cultures. When we are showing how we practice our faith through culture, then we must be gentle. Don’t force your culture too quickly. Show them the Word and show them how you practice your Religion through the Christian culture you chose. If we cannot show obedience and discipleship that is taught in Scripture in our traditions, we risk confusing people about what truly saves.

“*After this I beheld, and, lo, a great multitude, which no man could number, of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues, stood before the throne, and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, and palms in their hands;*” Revelation 7:9

All nations. All kindreds. All tongues. Heaven will not erase cultural diversity; it will redeem it. Every culture will acknowledge Christ. Yes, every society has culture. But culture without God will always cultivate something. If it does not cultivate truth, it will cultivate pride, power, pleasure, or personality.

Can you have religion without culture? In practice, no. Every religious expression forms habits, traditions, language, and customs. That in itself becomes a culture. The danger comes when our culture becomes our religion. When loyalty to tradition replaces loyalty to

Scripture. When devotion to a man replaces devotion to Christ. When preserving our way becomes more important than preaching the Gospel. Then culture shifts toward cult. We are called to plant seeds of truth. When our religion, our faith in Christ, informs and shapes our culture, something healthy grows. Culture becomes the active ingredient. It supports faith rather than replacing it.

If our religion is helped by our Mennonite culture, grounded in Scripture, centered on Christ, believers will thrive. But if our churches are culturally rigid while spiritually shallow, our young people will notice. They will question the balance. They will wonder whether they are following Christ or merely conforming to a system. The answer is not abandoning culture. It is examining what we are cultivating.

Are we cultivating Christlikeness? Are we cultivating humility? Are we cultivating love across cultural lines? Are we cultivating disciples? Are we cultivating obedience? We can use our culture to cultivate and grow our faith. What we cultivate determines what we will grow! I hope we can cultivate a Mennonite culture that will help us to stand before the throne, before the Lamb clothed in white robes!

~Will Taylor