

John Stonestreet & Brett Kunkle

A  
Student's Guide  
*to Culture*



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# A Student's Guide *to* Culture



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## Chapter One

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# What Culture Is and How It Shapes Us

*“If you want to know what water is, don’t ask the fish.”*

Ancient Chinese Proverb

Fish don’t know they’re wet.

In one sense, of course, there is nothing fish know more than water. They spend their entire lives in it. But the proverb above highlights how hard it is to know, understand, and evaluate the environment we’re in all the time. It can even be difficult to realize that we’re in an environment, which makes it impossible to resist the surrounding conditions. What we’re immersed in *just* becomes the norm.

Culture is to humans what water is to fish—the environment where we live and move and eat and work and play and, therefore, think is normal. But there’s a big difference between us and fish—we create our own environment; fish don’t. Think about it. Human beings impose themselves on the world in a way that animals don’t and can’t. Animals take the world as it is and then live in that world. They eat, sleep, and reproduce. That’s about it. Fish or dolphins or wolves or lions aren’t getting together to create cultures or entire civilizations. That’s utterly unique to human beings. We take the world and then form our own new little worlds out of the larger world. Our ability to create culture makes us vastly different from animals.

But like fish in water, we can become so immersed in our ways of thinking and patterns of living that we develop blind spots and lose sight

of how culture shapes us. We lose our ability to see problems and find it hard to resist the temptation to do what everyone else is doing.

Think of being unaware of the sheer beauty of a mountain you've always lived near or not recognizing the dysfunction of an abusive family because it's the only kind you've ever known. In the same way, culture shapes our perception of reality in ways we don't always recognize.

If we don't do the hard, intentional work of examining the world around us, it won't occur to us that things should be any different. Few things shape us like the ideas, customs, habits, and influences of culture. So it's vital we become fully aware of the cultural forces impacting our lives.

Of course, as Christians, our truest identity is determined by God. Scripture tells us we are the pinnacle of God's creation. We bear His image (Gen. 1:26–28). As such, we're much more than mere products of culture.

This is critical because how a culture views and values human life plays a huge role in whether it's healthy or not. Of all the reasons to be *intentional* to make sense of culture, this is the most important. We must never lose sight of the biblical vision of who we are as the most precious of God's creation.

You may be tempted to think, *When are we going to get to the really interesting stuff? Enough of all this theory and culture talk. I need help navigating issues like gender identity and transitioning, Snapchat, white privilege or #BlackLivesMatter, being gay and evolution. Let's skip to the practical stuff.*

We get it. Those issues are front and center in our culture. You face them almost every single day. But if you can be patient and trust us, we'll get there. Understanding the goal of this book may help you keep pushing through. We're not interested in merely talking about and analyzing culture. We want to help you *live well* in the culture. To be human and to be alive means we have to live in culture, deal with all this "stuff," and navigate the cultural land mines of ideas, values, issues, and structures. So, thinking well *and* living well are our goals.

But it's a daunting task. The hot topics may be obvious, but there are a bunch of cultural undercurrents that shape how we think and live. Beneath

the “waves” that dominate news headlines and social-media feeds are the subtle, yet important, cultural “undercurrents.” Sadly, a lot of Christians are oblivious to these unseen issues and, therefore, have no way of resisting their negative impact.

You must first understand these undercurrents in order to fully grasp the specific issues discussed later in the book. After all, the most powerful way culture shapes and influences us is in what it presents as being *normal*. For example, before you got your first smartphone (for the 95 percent of you who have one!), did you spend any time asking questions like, *Should I even own a smartphone? How will a smartphone shape my heart and mind? Can a smartphone actually harm me in serious ways?* Those questions never cross the minds of most people. Why? Because in our culture, owning a smartphone is just so normal. We make sure we own one because it would be abnormal *not to*.

But clearly, not everything accepted as normal *ought* to be, right? And that's why we can't just dive straight into the hot cultural topics. We need to look beneath the surface of culture. As Christian thinker C. S. Lewis said, “The most dangerous ideas in a society are not the ones that are being argued, but the ones that are assumed.”<sup>1</sup>

Back to the smartphone question. Is it wrong to own one? Of course not. We own them. However, we have also done a lot of careful thinking about how smartphones shape our lives and relationships. Studies show a risk for addiction and links between smartphone use and anxiety and depression. Yes, too much time on that device will impact your mental health. Despite how normal smartphones are, they're not harmless.

This is an example of a cultural undercurrent, something going on beneath the surface that most people aren't aware of. It's a cultural blind spot, and every culture has them. Thinking they don't exist reveals our ignorance not only of the subtle power culture has over our hearts and minds but also of the universal fallen human condition that infects all people in all times and all places.

So, don't make the mistake of jumping right into the hot topics. For the sake of your own future, you should think clearly about the most

important issues of our time *as well as* the dehumanizing undercurrents driving those issues. That's why we're going to spend some time thinking carefully about culture itself.

To start, let's get clear on what culture *is* and what it *is not*. An accurate definition of *culture* will help you see how it shapes you and what it is made of.

## What Culture Is (and What It Is Not)

*Culture* is a much-used word that's rarely defined.<sup>2</sup> It comes from the Latin word *cultura*, which means "agriculture." If plowing, tilling, and cultivating come to mind, they should. In its most basic sense, culture refers to what people do with their world: we build, we invent, we imagine, we create, we tear down, we replace, we compose, we design, we emphasize, we dismiss, we embellish, we engineer.

As author Andy Crouch says, "Culture is what human beings make of the world."<sup>3</sup> It's not what we do by instinct, like circulating blood, eating food, or sleeping. It's more what we do freely, like donating blood for a good cause, topping pizza with canned tuna (popular in Germany), or taking a nap in the afternoon (what Spaniards call a *siesta*).

Cultivating is exactly the sort of behavior we should expect from human beings made in God's image. After all, God's first command to Adam and Eve, and thus to all humanity, was to "be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it" (Gen. 1:28). God made humans with the capacity to do something with His world, and that's exactly what we do. It was part of God's plan from the beginning.

Another term found within the word *culture* can add to our understanding. It's the word *cult*. To be clear, we're *not* talking about a commune where people share all their possessions and chant together ten times a day. In this case the word *cult* points to the deeply held religious beliefs of a culture. We all have ideas about God, truth, morality, humanity, and the purpose of life. Those beliefs form our *worldview*. And our worldview,



regardless if we're consciously aware of it, shapes our actions and our interactions with others.

All of us have “belief glasses,” or a worldview through which we see the world. We don't look *at* our worldview; we look *through* it. It's the story through which we see and make sense of the real world.

The cultures we create reflect our worldview commitments. This is why cultures differ so greatly from one time and place to another. As Christian apologist Ravi Zacharias says, “In some cultures, people love their neighbors. In other cultures, they eat them.” Differences between cultures reveal dramatic differences of worldview. Shifts within a culture, like those that have taken place over the past few decades in the United States, reveal deeper shifts in our worldview.

Two more insights will help us understand culture and its power to shape us. First, *culture isn't fixed or static*. It's dynamic. Culture changes with human innovations, inventions, and ideas. Not all generations are equally comfortable with the way a culture changes. That's why your grandma may shake her head at your latest pair of ripped jeans, the newest Netflix series you and all your friends are bingeing, and other lifestyle choices you make, and vice versa.

Second, *culture includes smaller subcultures*. Though some cultural norms span entire sections of people within a country or society (like highways, internet access, and the federal government), there are other things (like trends, fashions, and ways of life) that distinguish groups of people from others within the same larger culture. For instance, the hairstyles, clothing, and music popular in Southern California may be really different from those in the Pacific Northwest or the Deep South. There can even be different subcultures on the same school campus, from the athletes to the brains to the emos and goths to the populars. Especially in a massive country like the United States, it's more accurate to speak of cultures (plural) than of the culture (singular). Subcultures also have tremendous power to influence our thoughts and actions.

## How Culture Shapes Us

Humans externalize their values, imaginations, innovations, and ideas onto the world around them by what they say and do. Basically, we take what's going on inside of us (in our hearts and minds) and we put it on the outside for all to see. A producer makes a movie, a fashion designer creates a clothing line, and an author writes a book—all examples of externalization.

Cultural norms are powerful. They determine much of our daily lives: our schedules, what we like and don't like, what we eat, what we wear, and how we spend our money. We settle into our culture's routines, lifestyles, and habits. For example, what you see your friends or celebrities or athletes "externalizing" on their Instagram feeds can influence you to buy a certain product, wear certain brands, or adopt certain values. As we consume our culture's products, ideas, and assumptions about the world, it shapes our lives by defining what is normal.

We can summarize these concepts with our analogy from the book's introduction: culture is like an ocean. When you swim in the ocean, you get wet. Splash around a bit and you'll get the people around you wet too. In the same way, we're all swimming (living) in the waters of culture and we're splashing it—the ideas and values—onto one another every single day. The difference is, you can't get out of this ocean. We live in it 24/7.

And that's the danger.

If you're not careful, you will find yourself becoming culture shaped rather than a culture shaper.

## What Culture Is Made Of

So, what's in the water? What is culture made of? There are four important categories in culture you should be able to recognize.

First, culture is made up of *ideas*. In a diverse society like ours, there are many different ideas about life and the world. For example, many people

think that truth, goodness, and beauty are mere matters of opinion—that is, subjective—rather than objective facts about the world. That's why you hear people make statements like, "You do you. I'll do me." They've been influenced by ideas in the culture. As members of society, when such ideas are presented to us as the norm, we often absorb them.

Second, ideas spread in a culture through *champions*. Certainly, this includes schoolteachers, college professors, and other academic types. However, originators of ideas rarely change culture without significant help from artists, storytellers, entrepreneurs, celebrities, and influencers who communicate their ideas through a third aspect, *artifacts*. An artifact can be a song, book, movie, class, podcast, invention, or social-media feed. The Protestant Reformation in the 1500s shifted culture in profound ways. But without the invention of the printing press that helped spike literacy rates by making books, especially the Bible, more accessible to everyday people, it wouldn't have.

Fourth, *institutions* maintain culture. An institution is a collection of people trying to accomplish a similar purpose. The most important institutions of a society are the family, church, and government. However, there is an endless list of other cultural institutions, such as sports teams, athletic leagues, schools, universities, clubs, businesses, media, and so on. And what determines how these institutions operate? Culture.

In our culture, educational institutions like schools and universities are viewed as the experts on knowledge. What's true and right and good is whatever is taught in schools and universities. In the United States, the media decides what counts as news. When media outlets spend most of their time on the latest celebrity gossip while ignoring disturbing videos about the abortion industry or the persecution of Christians, they're telling us what news and issues are most important.

When social institutions change, so does culture. Since the 1970s, shifts in the family, such as no-fault divorce, living together before marriage, and extended singleness, have significantly reshaped American culture. As the church becomes less important in the everyday lives of

citizens, other sources of moral authority become more important—and not for the better.

The Lord Jesus calls Christians not to be “conformed to this world, but ... transformed by the renewal of [our minds]” (Rom. 12:2). Resisting the cultural tidal wave may, at first, seem impossible. Thankfully, God’s given us a Story bigger than the current cultural moment that makes it possible.

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