

Reflecting Theologically on Popular Culture as Meaningful: The Role of Sin, Grace, and General Revelation

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Introduction

In the recent comedy *Nurse Betty*, Renee Zellweger plays Betty Sizemore, a waitress at a diner in a small town in Kansas. Betty is a devoted fan of the soap opera, "A Reason to Love." She even has a crush on the main character, the dashing Dr. David Revell. After witnessing the brutal murder of her husband, Betty slips into a psychosis, believing herself to be a nurse at Revell's fictional hospital, and Revell's ex-fiancé, whom she jilted six years ago. She leaves Kansas for Los Angeles to be reunited with her long lost (but fictitious) lover.

The film nicely illustrates the kind of suspicion that marks attitudes toward popular culture. Those who take it too seriously are seen as escapists, living life vicariously just one step from mental disorder. Popular culture should actually be taken casually because it is, by nature, trivial. It is also pervasive and enveloping. It surrounds us. Popular culture is our context, our world. Therefore, many (especially Christians) react to it with a mixture of disdain and dismay. It is my conviction that, given the pervasive influence of popular culture, thoughtful Christians should be willing to try to understand it and even investigate its theological significance. In other words, we should be ready to take popular culture seriously (though perhaps not in the same way as Nurse Betty did). The burden of this article is that popular culture does indeed mean something and that something is worth listening to.

Secular academia has been reflecting seriously on popular culture for some time now. In the past thirty years, the various interests and approaches that loosely fit under the heading of "cultural studies" have grown in popularity and sophistication within the liberal-arts curriculum. It has become commonplace to accept that popular culture is a subject worthy of serious study from any number of disciplinary perspectives (anthropological, sociological, literary critical, historical, and so forth). Even more recently, religion departments have begun taken an interest in popular culture. The American Academy of Religion held its 1998 conference at Walt Disney World and focused the lectures and seminars around issues relating to popular culture. More and more

religion scholars are now recognizing a certain homology between religion and American popular culture, even to the point of speaking of an “American cultural religion.”¹ Therefore, many religion scholars are paying a great deal of attention to popular culture as religion, listening intently to Pastor Mickey as it were. Books such as *Religion and Popular Culture in America* are attempts to connect these two fields of study.²

There are also signs that evangelicals are beginning to reflect seriously on popular culture. Stanley J. Grenz, in a recent article, urges evangelical theologians not only to engage popular culture critically but also to engage its concerns and assumptions as a way of elucidating evangelical theology.³ Professor Grenz argues that we must understand popular culture just because it is our world; it is the world we are trying to reach with the gospel.⁴ The present article attempts a complementary task but goes a step further. Instead of theologically reflecting upon the content and categories of popular culture, I will theologically reflect on the dynamics by which popular culture speaks, and why it speaks *meaningfully*. In other words, I want to engage popular culture at a much more basic level—at the level of theory, the level of fundamental structures and dynamics at work within popular culture—to illuminate their significance as meaningful communication. This article seeks to shed light on how popular culture means and the key role that general revelation plays in that dynamic of meaning.

We therefore need to be clear about three key terms: *popular*, *culture*, and *meaning* (we shall discuss the definition of general revelation later). Let us look at each separately. By *culture*, I obviously do not mean what thinkers in the nineteenth century meant by it—a growth toward the transcendent ideal of human perfection as expressed in its elite artistic expressions (though I would say that something transcendent *is* expressed in human culture). Such a highbrow definition is of little use in defining popular culture because it effectively places culture out of the reach of the majority of people, thus making it a preserve for the so-called cultured few. A definition of culture must include those who do not appreciate classical music or Chaucer, and yet have the right to be called makers, receivers, *participants* of culture. William Romanowski (borrowing heavily from a seminal cultural theorist, the late Raymond Williams) gives a much more comprehensive and inclusive definition:

¹ *Winston-Salem Journal*, B9-10, 28 November 1998.

² Bruce David Forbes and Jeffery H. Mann, eds. *Religion and Popular Culture in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

³ Stanley J. Grenz, “What Does Hollywood Have to Do with Wheaton? The Place of (Pop) Culture in Theological Reflection,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 43, no. 2 (June 2000): 303-14.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 313.

Culture refers to the network or system of shared meaning in a society, a conceptual collection of ideals, beliefs and values, ideas and knowledge, attitudes and assumptions about life that is woven together over time and is widely shared among a people. It is a kind of invisible blueprint - a map of reality that people use to interpret their experience and guide their behavior. The term *culture* refers directly to this fabric of meaning that is a people's way of life, and in its general usage also describes the "texts" of everyday life and material works that are a manifestation of a cultural system.⁵

What I like about this definition is the stress on culture as a *hermeneusis* of the world—that culture is about more than its own motions and structure. It is a window on our interpretation of reality or our place in the world. Further, it is an interpretive activity that engages *everyone*.⁶

Popular culture, then, is simply this type of network of texts by which we understand our world when those texts reach many people in a society. *Popular* simply stresses the fact that this type of culture is shared by most of the people in any given society (whether the texts involved are cartoons, tribal rituals, shopping malls, radio hits, or whatever).⁷ Popular culture is simply meaningful "texts" and behaviors that affect many people—the texts with the largest demographic impact on society.

What do we mean by *meaningful texts*? How are we to define *meaning*? This definition, above all, will be crucial for understanding what follows (especially part 3). One of the dominant understandings of *meaning* when talking about culture derives from Max Weber and is bound up with the question of *theodicy*.⁸ Given the random suffering (great and small) that the individual and the

⁵William D. Romanowski, *Pop Culture Wars: Religion and the Role of Entertainment in American Life* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 306.

⁶For a very succinct but helpful survey of how culture has been defined in the West, see Grenz, "What Does Hollywood Have to Do with Wheaton," 303-5. For a more detailed survey of attempts to define culture from the nineteenth century to the present, see John Storey, *An Introductory Guide to Culture Theory and Popular Culture* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1993).

⁷Here I am implicitly suppressing the difference between "folk" and "mass" culture that is found in evangelical writers such as Kenneth Myers and before him secular cultural theorists such as Dwight MacDonal and others who tried to update the highbrow cultural theories of the nineteenth century. The reason why I feel that the distinction between folk and mass culture should be suppressed is that, whether we like it or not, *both* types of popular culture share this function of *hermeneusis*. Therefore, for our purposes, both can be considered as kindred expressions of the human cultural drive.

⁸See, for example, Max Weber's "The Social Psychology of World Religions," in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* trans., ed. and with an introduction by H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1948), 271, 275, 280-81. This understanding of meaning has been pursued by sociologists influenced by Weber, such as Peter L. Berger and Clifford Geertz. See Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Doubleday, 1967), and Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), esp. 100-108.

group endure, how is one to make sense of it all? How is one to understand the caprice of life itself, to give life meaning? Meaning here is seen as a *projection* onto the face of chaos of uninterpreted, brute existence—*hermeneusis* as reflection of self onto the cosmos. Meaning is the human monologue in the face of suffering, a debate with the silence. By contrast, the way I shall be using the term is *dialogical*. Meaning in this sense is not traced back to a human projection but rather to a response to something *prior* to human interpretation. The presupposition of human culture as dialogical is foundational to a Christian theory of popular culture. Popular culture, as part of our acting together, must be seen as engaged not in a monologue with the abyss (or even with a beautiful and confusing world) but in dialogue with *revelation* that precedes us, surrounds us, and saturates us.

Therefore, the way we shall use *meaning* and *meaningful* will derive not so much from Weberian sociology (though such a perspective still has important insights because popular culture is an interpretive activity) but rather from language philosophy and linguistics. We need to see popular culture as a type of discourse, that is, that popular culture means in a way analogous to the way discourse means. I take meaning to be *that dimension of discourse that transcends the immanent operations and elements of discourse* (elements such as signs, grammar, locution, and so forth). When we talk to each other, our discourse gestures beyond itself toward our environment (the things we are talking about, the weather, whatever). Our discourse connects us and involves us with God's world, his general revelation, and therefore it *is* meaningful.⁹ Biblically informed theological reflection upon popular culture would insist that popular culture, likewise, *means* in that it, too, transcends the immanent operations of its own discourse. Popular culture is *about* something other than itself. It is more than about making money or what have you. That "something other" is what makes popular culture meaningful. To say it in another way: Any Christian theory of popular culture must understand that the interpretive terminus of popular culture resides in something other than the immanent operations and structures of the popular cultural discourse itself. It resides in the dynamic between popular cultural discourse and the discourse of general revelation.¹⁰

The alternative to seeing popular culture's interpretive terminus as residing beyond itself is, obviously, that its interpretive terminus lies within the operations and structures of popular discourse itself. That is, one may view popular

⁹That is not to say that all discourse is ostensive in nature, but there is an irreducibly referential dimension to language, something about discourse that involves the speakers in something other than the language itself—namely, the world around them. See Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976), 19-22 (though for Ricoeur, the connection is not with revelation but with an existential being in the world). It is that connectedness with God's general revelation that I take to be the locus of meaning in language.

¹⁰We shall explore more of what that means in part 3.

culture immanentistically as an end in itself. Many approaches, both Christian and non-Christian, effectively view popular culture in such immanentistic terms. I argue that operating under this kind of theory of popular culture (even if it is tacit and relatively unthematized) effectively short-circuits serious engagement with popular culture. Under such a theory (or quasi-theory), popular culture is cut off from the dynamics wherein it has meaning (understanding meaning as dialogical). Furthermore, an immanentistic theory of popular culture often serves to signal deeper theological problems (in the case of evangelical approaches to popular culture). Immanentism can even signal a type of theoretical rebellion *against* revelation, as non-Christian popular culture theory does when it suppresses the revelatory gesturing of popular culture in order to interpret it purely in political terms. Neither form of immanentistic theory of popular culture really allows popular culture to speak meaningfully, that is, to mean dialogically in tension with general revelation.

In part 1 of this article, I will first give a brief critique of some of the standard evangelical attitudes toward popular culture. Too often, evangelical approaches to (or better, withdrawals from) popular culture are marked by suspicion and a dismissive attitude—more reaction than reflection. In trying to separate themselves from popular culture, evangelicals unwittingly and tacitly assume an immanentistic theory of popular culture that cuts popular culture off from the dynamics that make it meaningful. Therefore, evangelicals often feel no need to listen carefully to popular culture's discourse. Such deafness, I will argue, stems from a thinness in American evangelical theology at certain key points, such as the doctrines of sin and of common grace. In part 2, I will critically engage two important streams of non-Christian cultural theory, Marxist and structuralist, and how they are combined in the culture theory of the early Roland Barthes. I will show how these very influential forces within cultural studies effectively suppress popular culture's ability to mean so that popular culture can be captured in a purely political discourse. Such a move, I will argue, robs popular culture of meaning as effectively as does the evangelical dismissal and suspicion of popular culture. It is immanentism in another key. In part 3, the center of gravity for this paper, I will give a positive account of the role of general revelation in the dynamics of how popular culture means. Once we reflect on how popular culture functions as general revelation *and* as a covenantal response to general revelation, then a way is opened up to see popular culture as genuinely meaningful, genuinely dialogical (even if that dialogue takes the form of a perpetual argument). Finally, in part 4, I will compare the two types of popular cultural discourse (that is, culture organized around two different heart responses to general revelation)—idolatrous and redemptive cultural discourses.

Let us begin by considering some of the evangelical responses to popular culture.

I. The Evangelical Reaction to Popular Culture

The evangelical engagement with popular culture has been long and troubled. During the past one hundred and twenty years or so, Christians' relationships with the emergence of new forms of popular culture has been more of a visceral reaction than thought-out reflection.¹¹ Non-Christian popular culture has been seen either as dangerous to the children, sinful, trivial, or deleterious to refined aesthetic standards (or sometimes, all of these at once).¹² Evangelicals since the 1970s have busily built up Christian equivalents to non-Christian popular culture—a cultural fortress to withstand the siege of what was seen as an increasingly hostile and ungodly dominant popular culture. This hostile popular culture was not seen as something *meaningful*, as something with a discourse that might be worth listening to. Therefore, a real engagement with that dominant culture was avoided and even shunned in many cases.

Popular Culture and Sin

Why have evangelical Christians reacted thus to the dominant strain of American popular culture?¹³ It has to do partly with the sense of alarm that parents feel in observing the popular cultural texts become more and more shocking and permissive in terms of sexual content and violence. “Quake,” one of many ultra-violent computer games, seems light years away from “Pong” (an early video ping-pong game). “Fatal Attraction” seems to be of a completely different culture than “Mr. Smith Goes to Washington.” Because these extreme texts are the most vivid, they seem to some to be indices of popular culture as a whole. So, Christian parents are understandably fearful.

There is another underlying reason that many evangelicals have withdrawn from popular culture. It is a theological reason that works in concert with their fear: the evangelical doctrine of sin. Many evangelicals seem to be guided by a semi-Pelagian heritage that views sin as discrete acts that can be, in a sense, isolated from the person.¹⁴ When someone becomes a Christian, he or she turns from his or her sinful acts. Sanctification, therefore, is seen as a process where these acts happen less and less (and one seeks environments where one is less

¹¹An excellent cultural history of the Christian reaction to popular culture (paying special attention to the emergence of cinema in America) can be found in William Romanowski's *Pop Culture Wars*.

¹²In this connection, Romanowski rightly remarks that popular culture cannot be both trivial and dangerous. *Ibid.*, 14.

¹³I recognize that there are many evangelicals who are apathetic concerning popular culture and are uncritical consumers. What follows is a friendly critique aimed at those who care enough about issues of popular culture to respond in some demonstrative way.

¹⁴Richard F. Lovelace attributes this heritage to increasingly rationalistic tendencies that characterized the eighteenth and nineteenth century Protestant theology. See his *Dynamics of Spiritual Life: An Evangelical Theology of Renewal* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 87-88.

liable to do these sinful acts). The dominant American popular culture, then, is seen as a willful and public act of sin and an enticement to others (especially to children) to follow in the sin of the sinful culture-makers. Such an approach to sin localizes the problem as something “out there,” something we can control if only we are careful enough. So, for many, the approach to popular culture has been a strategy not of engagement but of withdrawal.

Even evangelicals who appropriate popular cultural forms, such as contemporary Christian music, have practiced this cultural strategy of withdrawal. Such appropriation often is a substitute for real engagement by using popular cultural genre and cleansing them of dubious content and rendering them safe for evangelical listeners.¹⁵ It is withdrawal from the dominant popular culture through the creation of a subculture, and the reasons for withdrawal are essentially the same: to avoid contamination by the sinful dominant popular culture. Sin is somehow reified. It is something out there.

Such a reaction to the dominant popular culture signals what I call a thinness of the evangelical doctrine of sin. It is thin in two ways. First, it oversimplifies the way sin works in the world and in human beings. Sin can be identified and avoided too easily. Second, it is overly optimistic (a common American cultural tendency).¹⁶ This understanding of sin underestimates the depth, tenacity, and pervasiveness of sin. A few well-chosen lifestyle choices (including avoiding engagement with popular culture) can put one well on the way to personal holiness.

The Reformational understanding of sin, by contrast, is much more robust. Sin is so powerful and inescapable that we desperately need God’s intervening grace. Richard Lovelace, following this Reformational strain of thought, sees sin not as isolated acts of disobedience but as something more like a “psychological complex.” Sin is “an organic network of compulsive attitudes, beliefs and behavior deeply rooted in our alienation from God” (cf. Rom. 7:7-25, Gal. 5:17).¹⁷ This compulsive heart attitude is alleviated but not eradicated when we become Christians. Therefore, we continue to struggle with that compulsive, rebellious part of our hearts throughout our Christian lives. Further, it is something over which we never have complete control (and so we are constantly having to acknowledge God’s mercy and having to depend on his grace in repentance).

¹⁵See William Romanowski, “Evangelicals and Popular Music: The Contemporary Christian Music Industry,” in *Religion and Popular Culture in America*, ed. Bruce David Forbes and Jeffrey H. Mahan (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 105-24, for a brief but penetrating overview of evangelicalism’s appropriation of rock ‘n’ roll over the past thirty years.

¹⁶For a fascinating analysis of the religious roots of America’s trademark optimism, see William A. Dyrness, “The American Dream,” in *How Does America Hear the Gospel?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989).

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 88.

If such is our view of sin, then our approach to popular culture as a minefield of sin consequently changes. This is especially true if we understand popular culture as type of discourse, that is, as comprising three phases: sender → text → audience. When sin understood as compulsive idolatry and rebellion is applied to this model, the picture becomes much more complex. Idolatry cannot simply be out there, frozen in the structure of popular texts as it were. Rather, sin's effects will emerge at every phase of the discursive process.

Producers (the senders) of popular cultural texts work out of idolatrous hearts. Then those sinful patterns are, to some extent, replicated within the structure of the popular cultural texts (perhaps as enticements to idolatry). This is what many evangelicals react to (and rightly so). Further, these popular cultural texts are appropriated in sinful ways, feeding the idols of individual (or groups of) audience members, even in *rejecting* them (out of Pharisaical pride or self-protective fear). However we respond, our own hearts serve as collaborators, and the truth is, our hearts need no enticement to idolatry because our hearts are artesian wells of idolatry, to use Calvin's memorable image (see Mark 7:14-15, 20-23).¹⁸ One could even say that popular cultural texts are a pretext rather than an enticement to sin. It is not as if as if these texts pulled neutral or good people toward sin they would otherwise avoid.

The overall picture is one of sin as radical rebellion that dogs every step of the cultural communicative process. Why draw such a dark picture? Simply so that it will be clear that sin is pervasive and present at every step. Withdrawing from certain cultural texts and replacing them with others will not render the audience less sinful. Rather, the compulsive and organic nature of sin means that in eschewing certain cultural idolatries by disengaging ourselves from the surrounding culture, we are probably only setting up more socially acceptable idolatries that will be harder to detect and repent of (e.g., materialism, or the family, or pride in our own holiness).¹⁹

This "thick description" of sin as rebellion that permeates all that we do (or receive as discourse) ought to drive us to repentance, not withdrawal. Part of repentance from cultural idolatries ought to be a hermeneutical awareness of the heart issues of culture, including popular culture. Perceived sin in popular culture should, therefore, cause us to reflect on these idolatries in biblical perspective, that is, cause a positive and apologetical *engagement* with them rather than withdrawal from them. The radical and pervasive nature of sin ought to drive us to the radical nature of grace where sinners can be restored and renewed again and again and where real growth (though not sinless perfec-

¹⁸John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* trans. Ford Lewis Battles, ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 65.

¹⁹Romanowski, in "Evangelicals and Popular Music" demonstrates how the contemporary Christian music industry, beginning with good intentions to minister to the lost, came to replicate the identical idolatries of the secular music industry.

tion) is possible. Parents who have taught their children how to abide in Christ and drink deeply of his grace need not be afraid to engage popular culture (as wisdom guides) with their children.²⁰ The depth and pervasiveness of sin ought to force evangelicals to recognize the depth and pervasiveness of grace as well.

Popular Culture and Grace

The standard evangelical approach to popular culture also reveals a thinness in the evangelical doctrine of grace. Evangelicals often act as if there is nothing good about popular culture and that it is adequately defined as an expression of sinful man (and indeed, my thick description could leave that impression). However, this overlooks the expansiveness of God's grace. It does not simply stop at the boundaries of the Christian community. Many Calvinist theologians (Calvin among them) have long affirmed a preserving beautifying grace that is common to all humans.²¹

This grace is rooted in the character of the Father. Jesus points to his Father as someone who loves even his enemies by being gracious to them by giving them rain and sunshine (Matt. 5:44-45). Paul picks up the same theme when addressing the Lystrans, adding that this grace is to serve a revelatory function: "Yet he [God] has not left himself without testimony: He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy" (Acts 14:17). One could argue that God shows common grace only in nature and that culture is somehow excluded from the influence of common grace, but does God only use "natural things" as good gifts to people? The addition of "crop" (*cultivated* plant-life) certainly seems to add a cultural element to the natural gifts. That cultural element is amplified in Isaiah 28:23-29 where Isaiah discusses the details of wise farming technique. He concludes that all of it is "from the LORD Almighty, wonderful in counsel and magnificent in wisdom."²² Does Isaiah mean to say that this applied only to the covenant community? Did not Gentiles know how to farm too? Or does God bless even those who ignore and curse him and bless such people in and through culture?

²⁰I want to be very clear that when I critique withdrawal from the dominant popular culture, I am not saying that there is not room for appropriate withdrawal or protection. Such factors as age-appropriateness or areas of individual spiritual weakness must constantly be taken into consideration. What my critique targets is the withdrawal that extends beyond those factors, withdrawals that have become routine for evangelicals who are concerned about the dominant popular culture.

²¹For a very congenial and carefully argued investigation of the doctrine of common grace among Calvinist theologians, see Richard J. Mouw, *He Shines In All That's Fair: Culture and Common Grace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001).

²²Granted that the imagery of harvesting was being used as warning of the divine "harvest" Israel was going to endure, it is still an example of a cultural piece of wisdom (cultural technique) being attributed to the generosity of God.

It may sound strange to our pietistically tuned ears, but the goods of culture are the common grace gifts of God. There is a reason that the Bible begins with a garden and ends with a city (a ready-made *cultural* gift from God). Is it therefore so far-fetched to count popular culture as one of those things that God uses to “fill your hearts with joy” à la Acts 14? It certainly does function this way for many outside (and inside) the body of Christ. We need to see popular culture not simply as bad but as good gifts from God. These gifts have surely been twisted by sin, but they are good gifts nonetheless for which we should even give thanks. Calvin asserted that all truth is God’s truth, even if it is found among pagan philosophers. Their writings are gifts from God who preserves truth and beauty on his earth. Should we not say of popular culture what Calvin said of the pagan philosophers? “If we regard the Spirit of God as the sole fountain of truth, we shall neither reject the truth itself, nor despise it wherever it shall appear, unless we wish to dishonor the Spirit of God. For by holding the gifts of the Spirit in slight esteem, we condemn and reproach the Spirit himself.”²³ As it is, much of the evangelical world is in serious danger of ingratitude to God for his good gifts.

Let me give an example. Every other week, we invite college students (mostly non-Christians) into our home for a movie discussion night. One of the movies we have shown is the Vietnamese/American co-production *Three Seasons*, a collection of four intertwining vignettes. One story has to do with a cyclo²⁴ driver named Hai and his infatuation with an ambitious prostitute, a young woman who is sure she can sleep her way out of poverty and into the cool, clean world of the luxury hotels in which she works. After winning some money in a cyclo race, he pays \$50 to spend the night with her. He rents a room in a luxury hotel, and the scene leads you to expect a typical, erotic love scene. Against viewer expectations, though, he does not have sex with her. Instead, he simply requests to watch her sleep, to watch her rest in the world she dreams of joining. Slowly, comfortably, she falls asleep. He is gone by the morning having demanded nothing from her except the chance to fulfill her desire to belong. Something snaps in the prostitute, and she finds that she cannot return to her old job. It is a powerful scene, a completely unexpected glimpse of fragile beauty and selfless love. To my knowledge, director/screenwriter Tony Bui is not a Christian, and the character Hai has probably never heard the gospel. How then can we explain these and countless other glimpses of joy, truth, and beauty? The only way I can harmonize unredeemed humans as hopelessly ensnared in sin *and* moments of beauty and truth such as this is to see them as evidence of the work of a God who loves even his rebellious creatures and preserves the noble, creative image of himself in them despite the distorting effects of sin.

²³Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.2.15.

²⁴Cyclos, a common means of transport in urban Vietnam, are sort of a cross between a bicycle and a rickshaw.

These moments of grace simply *do* exist in popular culture. I know it, and so do my non-Christian students, though we interpret the significance of these moments quite differently, and that is where our discussions of movies often begin. It seems to me that evangelical theology needs to have some way of acknowledging such glimpses of light without undermining the biblical understanding of the sinfulness of humanity. We need a more robust theology of grace where God blesses those who hate him far more than they have any right to expect. While corrupted, popular culture is still a part of God's common grace to his enemies and loved ones alike, and, as such, it shines with revelatory significance even when that revelation is twisted (more on this below). Popular culture, then, is a mixture of human sin and God's common grace and therefore needs to be treated carefully and with a measure of reflection.

Other evangelicals, perhaps more culturally sophisticated, see popular culture less in terms of sin and more in terms of bad taste—a commercialized, aesthetically demeaning exercise in the base and common. One of the more thoughtful examples of this type of thinking is found in Kenneth Meyers' book, *All God's Children and Blue Suede Shoes*.²⁵ Despite the theological reflection and detailed argumentation, the book is finally little more than a jeremiad against popular culture; a prolonged appeal to Christians to "come out from them and be separate, says the Lord. Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you" (Isa. 52:11, 2 Cor. 6:17); a call to come out of the world of popular culture to the haven of high culture and fine art. Why does Meyers' theological reflection on popular culture go astray? Because he, like many other evangelical Christians, is wedded to a highbrow definition of culture derived from Matthew Arnold in the nineteenth century.²⁶ Such an approach to popular culture somewhat misses the point because it refuses to see popular culture as meaningful (that is, as meaningful dialogue with revelation [see below]). Whether or not popular culture is aesthetically good for you, it is where most of the people in our culture live. Therefore, it deserves a hearing, whether we find it aesthetically worthy or not.²⁷ If we are going to speak their language and know the hearts of

²⁵Kenneth Meyers, *All God's Children and Blue Suede Shoes: Christians and Popular Culture* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1989).

²⁶See Romanowski, *Pop Culture Wars* ch. 3, for a solid historical critique of the high/low cultural distinction, and Matthew Arnold in particular.

²⁷For many evangelical critics of popular culture, here the metaphor switches from culture as contagion (sinful culture as a virus to avoid) to culture as either nourishment or poison/corruption, depending on if it is high culture or low culture (popular culture as non-nutritious junk food). Aesthetically worthy culture is seen as a medicine for the soul—as true sustenance. This is an assumption inherited from Romanticism. While I would not want to discourage those who seek to enjoy the more sophisticated forms of culture (I myself am an ardent jazz fan), I believe that a Christian's nourishment does not come from culture but from God himself through the means of grace. Mistaking the enjoyments of culture for real spiritual bread runs the risk of producing cultural Christians (in H. Richard Niebuhr's sense). See H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Christ of Culture," in *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1951).

our non-Christian neighbors (or even our teenage family members), we must be conversant in the discourse of popular culture. In our own cultural pursuits, strive for excellence; strive for “the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you” (Jer. 29:7), but never forget that according to the Great Commission we are all missionaries. To be faithful to that call, we must be reflectively engaged with popular culture as our “target culture.” To this end, we need to be able to see the good and the true even in popular culture. We need to see how popular culture can mean, how it bears the conversation between the human heart and God’s revelation.

Of course, up until now I have only been addressing those evangelical Christians who consider issues of popular culture important enough to try to respond. I suspect that for far more, these issues do not even arise. They uncritically imbibe whatever popular culture feeds them. This is no better than the strategy of withdrawal from popular culture. Instead of recoiling from an apparent danger to the soul, other evangelicals seem to consider popular culture as harmless entertainment that may be enjoyed without a second thought, that is, without critical engagement. Like the withdrawal strategy, however, uncritical acceptance also reveals a weakness in evangelical theology, namely, the separation of faith and life that reflects the privatization of evangelical Christianity. Evangelicals often relegate spirituality to a private realm (for comfort, assurance, and so forth), which has little impact upon one’s public life. A brief reflection upon the totality of Christ’s claims on our whole lives should serve to correct this attitude, though according to some sociologists, the very contours of modern secular society serve as co-conspirators to such privatization.²⁸ What is needed is pointed theological reflection on how we understand popular culture. In critiquing the standard evangelical strategy of withdrawal, I am not therefore praising the other evangelical response of uncritical acceptance. Rather, I would like to see the development of a Christian critique of popular culture that has truly reflected upon the dynamics of popular culture theologically.

Evangelicals, historically, have not dealt well with the emergence and transitions of modern (and postmodern) popular culture. Too often, popular culture has been seen as a plague from which we must flee, or a corruption of the so-called sweetness and light of high culture, or a trivial entertainment that we may uncritically absorb. Each of these approaches suffers from an inability (or unwillingness) to understand popular culture as meaningful. I have argued that such responses reveal weaknesses in our theology—weaknesses that Calvinistic theology is particularly well suited to redress. As such, I believe it offers a fresh perspective on popular culture. It is an approach that listens with-

²⁸See David Lyon, *The Steeple’s Shadow: On the Myths and Realities of Secularization* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 58-63. For a more problematized view of privatization as part of the secularization thesis, see Jose Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), esp. 35-66.

out capitulating to cultural trends and that critiques without despising or dismissing. We can delve into popular culture as a meaningful phenomenon and explore what it is and how it means. To do that, we must reassess the way we think about sin and grace in relation to popular culture.

Evangelical Christians are not the only ones who have refused to see popular culture as meaningful. Secular cultural theorists have done likewise, but, as we shall see, for very different reasons. Let us examine two influential streams of thought within secular cultural theory. As we shall see, these streams of culture theory have their own strategies for robbing popular culture of its depth of meaning. Then we shall have the opportunity to give a positive account of the interaction between general revelation and popular culture.

II. Meaning in Popular Culture in Secular Cultural Studies

While it is impossible to generalize about a field as diverse as cultural studies, the most influential streams within this discipline are characterized by a marked bias against meaning (the Birmingham school, neo-Gramscian, and Foucauldian, to name a few). Rather than talking about meaning in culture, these traditions prefer to talk of meanings in culture. Any notion of a deeper meaning (who we are, what we are here for) is seen as epi-phenomenal, an illusion.²⁹ Secular cultural studies assert that culture is really about how competing power groups within a society represent themselves and their world by appropriating the symbolic resources available to them. Meaning is the net effect of such symbolic configurations. Because the symbolic terrain is contested, meaning is a shifting and unstable set of symbols. Culture, then, is not about *meaning* (as defined above), but is a battle over *meanings*.

Secular academia excludes meaning from popular culture for very different reasons than evangelicals tend to do. There are two sources for this exclusion of meaning. The first source of the presumption against meaning in contemporary culture studies that I will mention stems from the work of Karl Marx. Marx's approach to culture can be characterized as deterministic (albeit, deterministic "in the last instance"). In his famous "base/superstructure" model of culture, culture is ultimately determined by the economic structure of society.³⁰ The way that resources in a society are distributed and produced is the "base" that controls and conditions the cultural "superstructure." Elsewhere, Marx and Engels assert that culture (or the dominant ideas of a society—its ideology)

²⁹Identity is often part of these discussions, and so cultural studies would seem to touch upon deeply meaningful issues. When examined, however, identity often is defined almost wholly in terms of politics in opposition to the mainstream (e.g., queer identity, feminist identity, ethnic identity). While these discussions raise important issues, I would maintain that they do not deal with human beings in their depth and wholeness. See the next section below.

³⁰Karl Marx, "Preface," in *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (New York: International Publishers, 1970), 20-21.

is controlled by the ruling class, which uses culture to represent its own interests as the interests of all.³¹ Culture here is seen as a smokescreen to hide the real situation—that a minority controls the means of production, thereby marginalizing the majority.

While many cultural theorists who came after Marx disagreed with him and wanted to grant culture more autonomy, more causal determination, Marx succeeded in setting the terms of the debate—the agenda of cultural studies. The consensus opinion in cultural studies (for most are at least influenced by Marx) is that the ultimate horizon for interpretation is political. Culture is ultimately about who has power or who controls the resources available to us, be they material or symbolic. Since the 1960s, that question is no longer formulated in terms of class alone but in terms of race; ethnicity; gender; and later, in terms of sexual orientation. Culture is not about meaning but about a struggle over meanings and representations as a way to control resources and thus as a means to power. However, if culture (including popular culture) is truly meaningful, then it should not be reduced to merely political agonistics.

The second source for the bias against meaning that I will mention comes from the work of nineteenth century linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, the father of structuralism (and grandfather of post structuralism). A significant branch of cultural studies models culture upon language from a specifically Saussurean perspective. Saussure saw language as a closed, arbitrary system of signs. The signs within the language system were not defined primarily by referring to the world outside but rather were defined negatively in opposition to other signs (for example, “sky” means not ground, not clouds, and so forth).³² In order to study language more precisely, Saussure suppressed language’s mediatorial function, how it conveys reality to us from the outside world. Meaning for Saussure is not a connection with the world but rather a position within a closed sign system, a position defined merely by opposition with other signs—and these oppositions themselves are merely conventional.³³ The implication for a theory of popular culture is that the configurations of symbols that we take to be meaningful are, at bottom, arbitrary arrangements within a closed system of cultural signs. It is a construct and nothing more. But if popular culture is truly meaningful, then there must be something more to it than its nature as a construct. To anticipate section 3, I argue that this “something more” is a depth of meaning in dialogue with general revelation.

³¹Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, “Ruling Class and Ruling Ideas,” in *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*, ed. John Storey (Hertfordshire, England: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994), 196-97.

³²Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics* trans. Roy Harris (LaSalle, Ill.: Open Court, 1986), 118-20.

³³Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics* 67-68. See also Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University, 1976), 3-6.

Perhaps a brief example will clarify how the influences of Marx and Saussure coalesce in contemporary cultural theory to bury meaning. French culture theorist Roland Barthes' groundbreaking collection of essays, *Mythologies*,³⁴ set the direction for much of contemporary cultural semiology. In the famous first essay, "The World of Wrestling," Barthes approaches the cultural phenomenon of professional wrestling as a semiotician would approach a text. Wrestling, for Barthes, is not so much a sport as a scripted performance—culture as choreography.³⁵ Each wrestler becomes a visible sign, an image of moral virtues or vices by the way he looks, fights, and presents himself in the ring (consider the torn black T-shirt of "Macho Man/Madness Randy Savage"; the red, white, and blue eagle mask of "The Patriot"; the baggy, silk magenta pants of his nemesis, "The Sultan").³⁶ The wrestlers overact in order to produce a spectacle of "Suffering, Defeat and Justice."³⁷ The aim of the fight is to have these visible signs of eternal values produce a compelling narrative through a mimed display of gut-wrenching struggle, jeopardy, and sudden reversals of fortune that lead to a morally satisfying conclusion devoid of ambiguity (some might argue that Hollywood is in the same business). In this display, wrestling serves a social function—it comforts us in our alienation and confusion. Popular culture (professional wrestling, in this case), according to Barthes, is in the business of making meaninglessness seem meaningful.

In wrestling, nothing exists except in the absolute, there is no symbol, no allusion, everything is presented exhaustively. Leaving nothing in the shade, each action discards all parasitic meanings and ceremonially offers to the public a pure and full signification, rounded like Nature. This grandiloquence is nothing but the popular and age-old image of the perfect intelligibility of reality. What is portrayed by wrestling is therefore an ideal understanding of things; it is the euphoria of men raised for a while above the constitutive ambiguity of everyday situations and placed before the panoramic view of a univocal Nature, in which signs at last correspond to causes, without obstacle, without evasion, without contradiction.³⁸

³⁴Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Noonday Press, 1972).

³⁵*Ibid.* 16. See also Jeffery C. Alexander, "Analytic Debates: Understanding the Relative Autonomy of Culture," in *Culture and Society: Contemporary Debates* ed. Jeffery C. Alexander and Steven Seidman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 12.

³⁶Wrestlers can even change personae depending upon their mood or audience taste. A wrestler from Long Island, Mickey Foley, tours with the WWF using three distinct characters: "Cactus Jack," a wild West, win-any-way-you-can character; "Mankind," a menacing, deranged persona complete with studded leather mask; and "Dude Love," an easy-going 1970s throwback, complete with tie-died shirt, headband, and attendant female groupies. See George Napolitano, "The Three Faces of Foley," *TV Wrestlers* February 1998, 16.

³⁷Barthes, *Mythologies* 19.

³⁸*Ibid.*, 24-5.

It is an elegant and brilliant analysis but also fundamentally wrong-headed. It reduces motivated cultural action to the play of empty signs.³⁹ That is not to say that professional wrestling is not scripted, but it fails as an archetype of popular culture even within the wrestling arena. Barthes would have us believe that the cultural spectacle is a deeply meaningless activity, a coherent display of that which *in principle* can never be coherent (what he calls “Nature”—the concept he is trying to denaturalize).⁴⁰ When this ultimately nihilistic structuralism is joined with Barthes’ Marxist convictions, popular culture emerges as a ploy to keep false-consciousness afloat by covering up the alienation generated by a bourgeois society, which is a colorfully empty opposition between cultural signs that looks so Natural. Popular culture is a closed sign system that covers up a political agenda. The mythologist (Barthes’ term for a cultural analyst) is the one who defuses the ruse and unmask the meanings to show the absence behind the façade. The mythologist is a professional cynic: “[The mythologist’s] connection to the world is on the order of sarcasm.”⁴¹ Such a sarcasm can only subvert without ever understanding the motivation of cultural actors toward meaning. It can only dismiss but cannot trace the kitsch “hungering and thirsting after righteousness” displayed by a crowd that desperately wants to see Good triumph over Evil in the ring (even if it is just a show).⁴² For Barthes, culture must be continually demythologized—what appears Natural is always politics in disguise. For something such as professional wrestling to work—that is, to capture and motivate the imagination of its audience—there must be something else going on. There must be meaning, even if only in a dis-

³⁹See Alexander, “Analytic Debates,” 12.

⁴⁰In a later article, “The Death of the Author,” Barthes makes this bias against meaning chillingly explicit as a vendetta against meaning (and therefore, against God). By removing a unified author from “behind” a text in the interpretive process, one can also remove the last traces of the Creator.

In precisely this way, literature (it would be better from now on to say *writing*), by refusing to assign a ‘secret’, an ultimate meaning, to the text (and the world as text), liberates what may be called an anti-theological activity, an activity that may be called truly revolutionary, since to refuse to fix meaning is, in the end, to refuse God and his hypostases—reason, science, law.

Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” in *Image-Music-Text* trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 147.

⁴¹Barthes, *Mythologies* 157. The principle that “man in a bourgeois society is at every turn plunged into a false Nature” miraculously escapes such cynicism (perhaps because it seems so Natural to Marxists). *Ibid.*, 156.

⁴²There are other motivations than a hunger for Good to triumph in the ring. The rise of the anarchic NWO (New World Order) draws upon different desires and motivations (for power, freedom from constraining mores, and so forth). But it is no less meaning-ful for all that.

torted and twisted form.⁴³ It is just this meaning that Marxism and structuralism seek to suppress when considering popular culture.

I suggest that the antidote for both the evangelical dismissal of meaning from popular cultural discourse and for the secular suppression of popular cultural meaning is theological reflection upon how general revelation acts in and through popular culture.

III. How General Revelation Restores Meaning

Before I suggest how the biblical presupposition of general revelation can restore meaning to a theory of popular culture, I ought to reiterate what I mean by *meaning*. *Meaning*, as I said above, is that dimension of discourse that transcends the immanent operations and elements of discourse to gesture toward something outside itself. Meaning is dialogical, responsive to the world around us. Popular culture, as meaningful discourse, is not simply about itself, about money, or about politics. Ultimately, it gestures beyond itself toward this broader dialogue with the world and with general revelation.

So, while popular culture can be sinful, manipulative, or kitschy, that is never all that it is (as it is for many evangelicals). While we cannot ignore the political dimension of popular culture, cultural discourse means more than simply politics (as it is for many neo-Marxists). Politics as a popular cultural operation itself needs to be explained. (That is, what motivates politics, what makes politics *meaningful*—in the sense defined above—rather than simply manipulative?) While popular cultural theory should pay attention to semiotic interactions and oppositions, popular culture means more than the configurations of sign systems (as it is for the structuralists). The motivation behind those configurations still needs to be explained. (For instance, why do those who participate in those sign systems perceive them as meaningful?). It is this something more—this meaningful depth in popular culture—that a theological reflection on the role of general revelation can illuminate.

If popular culture does in fact mean by gesturing beyond itself, by overflowing its own forms, and, if this cultural gesticulation has something to do with our connection with the world in which we live (that is, culture as a mediator between humans and their world), then it should be obvious how general revelation can clarify matters here. General revelation is a theological term used to describe God's discourse about himself as delivered through his creation. It speaks of his glory (Ps 19:1-4), his wrath against fallen humanity (Rom. 1:18-19), and his divinity and eternal power (Rom. 1:20). It is his indicting testimony (Acts 14:17), and it communicates a knowledge of God himself, all of which

⁴³This understanding of culture is, in a way, Augustinian. Just as Augustine asserted that evil is always goodness twisted, so, too, popular culture's manipulations are always twisted meaning. Popular culture is never merely a political-linguistic construct, never merely manipulation. Manipulation hangs upon meaning like a parasite.

ought to lead people into thanksgiving, except that they suppress that knowledge in idolatry (Rom. 1:21-23). In short, general revelation is God's discourse about himself mediated through his creation (including through human beings—what Calvin called the “seed of religion”) that presses in upon the human heart from all sides and leaves human beings without excuse. Because God is the Author of all meaning, contact with his discourse through general revelation is, *ipso facto* meaningful.⁴⁴ Popular culture (and culture in general), I believe, makes such a contact because it is the human discursive response to God's discourse of general revelation. Culture is meaningful because it has ultimately to do with this human-divine conversation, the play between revelational discourse and human cultural-counter discourse. In short, popular culture is meaningful because it is irreducibly religious.

If general revelation is going to have this role in cultural theory, then we must broaden and deepen our understanding of general revelation. Some would take general revelation as merely information we can use to construct a natural theology,⁴⁵ but such a concept of general revelation infers a rational distance. General revelation in this case is static input that the apologist can call upon when reasoning with the unbeliever—something tucked away at the back of the brain.⁴⁶ The picture of general revelation and its impact on the sinful heart in Romans 1:18-25 is much more dynamic and urgent. The rebel against God is impacted by the revelation of God's wrath and our own rebellion, similar to the way in which the way a psycho-killer keeps hearing voices in his head and cannot rest until he acts upon them.⁴⁷ Everything in God's creation order (including our very selves) is permeated with voices shouting the claims of God

⁴⁴Rereading Barthes' revolutionary execution of the Author in terms of the pervasiveness of general revelation, one might detect just a hint of desperation underneath the defiance.

⁴⁵See R. C. Sproul, John Gerstner and Arthur Lindsley, *Classical Apologetics: A Rational Defense of the Christian Faith and a Critique of Presuppositionalism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 62-63. While Sproul and company discuss the psychological impact of general revelation (its traumatic impact, suppression, and substitution for idolatry), the practical upshot of Romans 1 for them is that we have certain information about God and therefore a natural theology is possible (Ibid., 58-63). Such a reading completely misses the existential force of general revelation. General revelation is not simply knowledge, not even buried knowledge. It is an active, compelling force constantly bearing down upon (and constantly being suppressed by) those who bear God's image and who are in rebellion against him.

⁴⁶Sproul, Gerstner, and Lindsley say that the knowledge of God is “buried in the subconscious realm and “deeply submerged in the mind” (Ibid., 59). They see general revelation as latent information waiting to be summoned by the apologist rather than a currently active force.

⁴⁷This is how I understand the force of the present passive participle, ἀποκαλύπτεται (“is being revealed”): a constant, insistent bearing down upon the consciousness of the rebel. It is suppressed by the idolatrous heart, to be sure, but it never sinks quietly down into the subconscious because the revelation keeps resurfacing as revelation to finds ever-new avenues of attack. Hence, the present passive participles of verse 20, νοούμενα (“are being understood”) and καθοπαται (“are being seen”). The wrath revealed is always fresh, a continuously *present* reality.

upon our lives. Sinful men and women's hearts are locked up in pride and will not respond in thanksgiving, but they have to do *something*. So, they turn to idols to ameliorate the voices without properly answering them. If we understand general revelation as that dynamic, that insistent, that compelling, then we gain a concept of general revelation that is far more flexible (and biblical) with which to motivate our cultural theory—that is, popular culture as a response to the voices in our heads, the voices with which creation is saturated.

I propose a two-fold dynamic at work between general revelation and culture consisting of a dynamic of *appropriation* and a dynamic of *provocation and tension*.

Culture Appropriates General Revelation

If general revelation permeates all of creation, then popular culture itself becomes an appropriation of general revelation. It must appropriate general revelation, for creation surrounds culture and provides it with a necessary context. The orderly, law-structured character of creation is itself a condition for sustaining culture. How could you build a house if the wood turns to pudding every so often or the nails shatter without warning? How could you make an animated cartoon unless you could count on time flowing in one direction and in even increments? How do you play an electric guitar if the strings vibrate at one pitch sometimes and at another the next moment for no reason at all? This essential regularity, this order that can be counted on, reveals something of God's goodness and faithfulness to us. When we "do culture," we are taking revelation in our hands and fashioning it for our own purposes (to build a house, paint a picture, or create a television show). The raw materials reveal their Creator. In suppressing general revelation, rebels must deafen themselves to the cry of the tools in their hands or the asphalt under their feet. We do culture using borrowed capital. What rebellious, fugitive men and women most want to avoid is that which they take and use every day. All of this compounds the ingratitude and leaves humankind completely without excuse. General revelation is that inescapable.

General Revelation Provokes Culture and Is in Tension with It

Another dynamic between general revelation and popular culture is one of provocation and tension. General revelation provokes a cultural response and is in constant tension with it. It works like this: Culture (and here, specifically popular culture) is about the myriad ways we make a dwelling for ourselves on the earth. A house is not merely a shelter, but it is a place that you make your own through the decoration in your living room, the arrangement of your kitchen, and so forth. Time is not something we simply pass through but something we make our own by the activities we plan our day around (work, family dinner, the regularly scheduled TV shows we watch at night, and so forth.) Likewise, culture as a whole is a way of claiming space and time for ourselves,

making a world for ourselves to live in, and creatively imprinting ourselves upon the world. Culture sends the message: This is my/our home.

However, the message of general revelation counters: This is *not* your home. General revelation, according to Romans 1, is about the myriad ways in which God's wrath is revealed against his rebellious creatures. If we are to give the phrase, "The wrath of God is being revealed" of Romans 1:18 its widest possible ambit, then every tragedy, setback, and disappointment is but Hell writ small—a preview of coming attractions for the one who rebels against God.⁴⁸ The very fallenness of creation, the frustration, the bondage and decay to which God has subjected creation (Rom. 8:20-22), the fact that we die and suffer countless little deaths along the way—like losing our hair, or our jobs, the flooded basement, the weeds in our garden, the cancer we catch from the sun—all are creation's way of saying: You are not home. You are not welcome here because you are in rebellion against our maker.

God did create the world for human habitation, so, in a sense, this *is* our home. I do not want to be interpreted as maligning the goodness of God's creation, but the original intent of our habitation and culture-forming here was to be offering what we developed from God's creation back to God as an offering, even as we also enjoyed it.⁴⁹ After the Fall, however, that ongoing priestly activity (culture as λειτουργία, service or worship) was replaced by the idea of cultural development as a self-focused occupation, a development of *our* world for *our* home. The ideal of culture as thanksgiving was replaced by culture as a statement of autonomy. Because of God's mercy and patience, there is still much common grace or revelations of God's love toward his creation (see, for example, God's feeding the creatures in Ps. 104, cf. Luke 12:22-31). Sinful humanity, though, refuses to recognize this home of ours as a gift. So, even those instances of beauty, joy, truth, and comfort that are a testimony to God's goodness and longsuffering (Acts 14:17) come with the message: These are not yours. They belong to their maker to whom you are not giving thanks. This world is our home but not *our* home. There is an ownership dispute between God and humanity. Even God's gifts to us render us ingrates without excuse. All of this is not because God is spiteful but as a way to make humanity's need for Christ clear and exigent, to show something of our desperate situation outside of Christ (see Eph. 2:1-3). In all sorts of ways, then, creation delivers the (bad)

⁴⁸This is not to deny that tragedies and disappointments come because of our sin, or someone else's, or Satan. It is surely a cornerstone of Reformed theology that God is somehow in control of all of these, yet without sin (see *The Westminster Confession of Faith* V.1-4). Should it be any surprise that these, too, should be revelatory of God?

⁴⁹Hence the biblical concepts of the tithe and firstfruits (see Deut. 14:22-9, Ex. 23:19): A portion is given to God to represent ownership, the one who really owns the whole crop.

news about God and our standing with him, and that message is in tension with the message of cultural discourse that we are, in fact, in our home.⁵⁰

In this way, both popular culture and general revelation are *interpretive* discourses. They both predicate certain interpretations about who God is, who we are, and what our place is in the world, but these two interpretive discourses struggle against each other, each trying to cover the other over. For example, take the death of a loved one. It is the clearest revelation of God's wrath on fallen humanity, of the fact that our life on earth is "under wrath," and that this territory does not belong to us (see Ps. 90:5-10). Popular cultural discourse responds by trying to domesticate death by surrounding it with symbols that attempt to make death understandable and palatable. We see a beloved character die on "Ally McBeal," and somehow they move on with grace and dignity. So, too, therefore, can we. Or take, for example, a hurricane (another revelation that we are unwelcome guests here). Cultural discourse responds by putting up sea walls to prevent beach erosion (that consequently erode the beach further down shore). Or it responds by producing movies such as "The Perfect Storm," which provides a quasi-existentialist counter-interpretation where heroic men and women struggle against a faceless, pitiless Nature and where somehow "love conquers all." The cultural discourse reinterprets the revelation of God's wrath into a blank fate that can be dealt with through the tenacity of romantic relationship; thus obviating the need for repentance to a personal God. In this way, the revelational discourse and the cultural discourse are dissonant and in tension with each other.

IV. Idolatrous and Redemptive Cultural Discourse

Up to this point, I have oversimplified the cultural situation by putting everything into one category and by asserting that this category (popular culture) is in tension with general revelation. A Christian cultural theory, however, must make a crucial distinction. If culture is a religious heart-response to general revelation, then one's heart-orientation is the decisive factor in interpreting popular culture from a Christian perspective. Humans are oriented toward God and his revelation either in covenant obedience and submission or in covenant rebellion. Consequently, the cultural discourse that seeks to interpret the dissonance posed by general revelation will be characterized by either idolatry or a redeemed perspective. Cultural discourse is like a music that is performed in an idolatrous or redemptive "key," if you will.

⁵⁰Even when we have ended our rebellion against God by submitting to the rule of his Savior, we still live in a fallen world. Therefore, we suffer a common lot with the whole of humanity as fallen and are not exempted from the wrath of God that is being revealed. This is to be weighed against the fact that in Christ, our salvation is accomplished and that we have a genuine hope (see, for instance, Rom. 8:18). Further, God takes special note of his people, even while they struggle under the common lot of fallen humanity (Ps. 116:15). This is just one aspect of the tension of life on a fallen earth for believers. See below, section 4.

Even using the dichotomous distinction idolatrous and/or redeemed, we are still oversimplifying and dealing in ideal types. We need to bear in mind that the antithesis between covenant keepers and covenant breakers runs right through the believing heart (see Romans 7). We ought to expect redeemed cultural texts to bear within themselves traits of our idolatry and sin, that is, of our indwelling sin nature. Note the harsh, judgmental attitudes displayed in many Christian books that speak the truth but not in love; or the moments when Christian music becomes maudlin, and its sentimentality betrays a subtle idolatry in a loss of touch with reality. Sin (covenant rebellion) permeates even the cultural works of people who sincerely want to keep the covenant. Obversely, given the reality of common grace, we should not expect a perfect one-to-one correspondence between an idolatrous culture maker's heart and the cultural activity and artifacts either (God's grace allows even idolatrous cultural activity to be beautiful, true, worthy, and so forth). There are real moments of transcendence even in shows such as "The X-Files," in the way it shows concern for the marginalized, the ones who do not quite fit in, and the dispossessed (even if they take the form of alien abductees). Mulder and Scully often display compassion, of a sort, even among all of the paranormal spookiness. There is something good there, something that reflects the image of God. So the polarity between these two types of cultural discourse is not as black and white as it first appears—the black hats are not all black, and the white hats are not all white. Rather, I am saying that there is a *principal* difference that is reflected in a difference in organizing commitments or drives. The practical cultural outcomes will, naturally, be more or less consistent with that heart commitment, given the realities of our sinful nature and common grace. Popular culture is a messy business. Still, it is helpful for purposes of analysis to deal with idolatrous and/or redeemed as ideal types.

Idolatrous Cultural Discourse

An idolatrous cultural discourse responds to the dissonance between culture and general revelation by trying to stifle it or overwrite it. The cultural predication of the idolatrous community seeks to avoid dealing with the God whose wrath and glory is displayed on earth (see Ps. 19:1-4; Rom. 1:18) by attempting to simultaneously appropriate and efface it, to write over the story God has written.⁵¹ The relation of culture to the general revelational context of culture is one of a *palimpsest* (a text written over and obscuring an underlying text), except that the competing lines of text are in dynamic motion, responding to and countering each other's moves. They dance, if you will, what we could call a palimpsest dance—a game not of hide and seek but seek to keep the other hidden. General revelation uses dissonance—the curse, suffering,

⁵¹Remember that idolatrous cultural discourse must appropriate general revelation because human culture depends upon God's creation and revelation as its necessary context. Even the very means of its rebellion must be taken as a gift from God.

existential aporias as well as inexplicable common grace, order, wisdom, beauty, and truth (what Cornelius Van Til called “borrowed capital”)—to reveal God. Idolatrous cultural discourse counters by attempting to reduce that tension through cultural processes and artifacts. General revelation responds in turn by using that dynamic, even the idolatrous cultural forms, to once again assert God’s claim upon his creation and his image-bearers; and so on, and so on. The tension between revelation and idolatry will continue until the Parousia. Until then, there will be no univocal victory except as people flee idolatry and submit to God (and even then, believers must still wrestle with indwelling idolatry). Idolatry cannot finally efface revelation. Otherwise, it would stop being revelation and there would be no point in claiming in Romans 1:21 that all people know God.

Perhaps a brief example will clarify this idea of the relationship between general revelation and popular culture as a palimpsest dance. John Fiske in his book *Reading the Popular* examines the relation among shopping malls, female consumers, and shopping practices.⁵² According to his argument, the standard leftist critique of capitalism needs revising because it sees this relationship merely as one more example of capitalist exploitation of a disempowered group—women sucked into a consumerism that supports the capitalist patriarchal power structure. Fiske sees the relationship as more complex. Women have used the forms of capitalism to subvert their disempowerment by creating an empowering popular cultural practice, namely, shopping at the mall. One part of his argument runs thus: Women are disempowered by being relegated to a private space (the home) and to unwaged labor as domestic slavery (versus being empowered in the public, wage-earning arena).⁵³ The mall subverts this disempowerment. The mall is seen as a place that dissolves those binary oppositions (of public/private, waged/unwaged). By window-shopping or trying on but not buying, a woman can subvert the oppositions between public and private, for sale and bought, by trying out things not her own as if they were.⁵⁴ The breakdown of these oppositions marks an emancipation from that system, a way that the disempowered can trick the system and use it to their own ends.

A popular cultural theory informed by a strong theology of general revelation would reinterpret Fiske’s analysis thus: The condition of the disempower-

⁵²See John Fiske, “Shopping for Pleasure,” in *Reading the Popular* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989) 13-42, esp. 18-24.

⁵³Fiske’s analysis assumes that housewives and mothers are in fact slaves by virtue of the fact that their labor earns no monetary income. I believe that this is a partial truth. On the one hand, our culture (as well as Fiske’s white Australian culture) tends to marginalize and underappreciate the value of the labor of housewives and mothers. On the other hand, seeing that kind of labor as slavery because it does not make money is to ignore various other currencies in circulation (relational intimacy with children, satisfaction at being able to order and creatively leave one’s imprint on one’s home, and so forth). My interpretation of Fiske’s analysis, which sees “unwaged labor-slavery” as revelation, is responding to the element of truth in Fiske’s argument.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, 23.

ment of women may be a social and cultural reality, but that is never *all* that it is. It is an example of general revelation mediated through popular cultural forms. The bondage and powerlessness of unwaged labor-slavery (to the extent it really is slavery) is a revelation of God in that it is a precursor of his judgment, a foreshadowing of Hell, where women who are in rebellion against God will find themselves eternally alienated from power in an eternal bondage.⁵⁵ In this way, general revelation is dissonant and literally im-pertinent in relation to cultural discourse (that is, it does not make sense that one's own dwelling should be the site of bondage). The idolatrous cultural discourse responds by trying to reduce that revelational dissonance by subverting it, by shopping without buying, and trying without taking; thus effacing the powerlessness of women by the trickster cultural power of the female shopper. Fiske seems to think that the trick is successful. I am not so sure. The effacement is at best partial. The force of the revelation shifts without diminishing—that is, it is merely displaced. Shopping without buying is the perfect cultural symbol of incompleteness, exclusion, lack of consummation, or “salvation” repeatedly deferred and interrupted. This very lack of consummation can be seen as a reassertion of that revelatory dissonance that gestures beyond itself again to a judgment that will include an exclusion from the realm of consummation. Even if the shopper “saves” herself by buying something (even given that she is using the resources provided by her male oppressor in a way that subverts the patriarchal power structure),⁵⁶ she has entered into a different kind of bondage where buying and having only engenders more buying. The cultural identity she carves out for herself by her consumption must be constantly attended to by buying more identity-forming things, and the revelational dissonance of incompleteness emerges once again.⁵⁷ So the dance goes on and the tension is unabated.

⁵⁵Please understand that I am not saying that God (that archetype of patriarchal oppression to some) is out to get women. Rather, I am attempting to show how elements of truth in a contemporary cultural analysis can be contextualized within a Christian theology of popular culture, and part of that task involves showing how those elements act as general revelation. Because of their social and cultural position, women of a given culture will receive general revelation in a way different from men of that same culture (though, to be sure, with certain affinities, for they belong to the same culture, the same set of popular cultural discourses). Men will see different pictures of God's wrath and construct different idol discourses to suppress them. Also, seeing a type of oppression as general revelation does not mean that God is responsible for social oppression (see the *Westminster Confession of Faith* V.4). Rather, it means that God can and does use oppressive structures as revelation, but using them thus means neither that those structures are thereby baptized nor that we ought not to strive to challenge and alleviate genuine oppression.

⁵⁶See Fiske, “Shopping for Pleasure,” 24.

⁵⁷However, the wise woman of Proverbs 31 serves as an excellent counter-example. She engages in vigorous economic activity in a way that does not draw upon an idolatrous cultural discourse. She is not shopping for salvation, not trying to gain an identity for herself in the goods she purchases. Therefore the revelational context does not respond to her as it would in an idolatrous cultural discourse. The dance of redemptive cultural discourse is very different, even when the cultural activities are similar. (Thanks to Carolyn Turnau, my wife, for this insight).

This kind of back and forth, each using the other as a foil, is typical of the relationship between idolatrous popular cultural discourse and general revelation. This dance, however; this move and countermove, shows that idolatrous popular culture refers to something beyond itself, namely, to this ongoing acrimonious conversation. In this way, idolatrous popular cultural discourse *means* in the sense I defined above. A sound theology of popular culture sees even idolatrous popular culture as meaningful because it is in contact with God's general revelational discourse to us, albeit tensively and provocatively. Therefore, popular culture is worth listening to. That conversation is worth overhearing if we want to genuinely understand the idolatries and tensions with which our neighbors (and we ourselves) struggle.

Redemptive Cultural Discourse

Redemptive cultural discourse also has everything to do with tension, but here it is not a tension between two discourses fighting against each other as in general revelation versus idolatry. Rather, redemptive popular cultural discourse internalizes the tension. Redemptive cultural discourse seeks to redeem culture from a fallen world, to rehabilitate, to reconfigure, and to reorient culture to the glory and service of God, that is, to cause culture to affirm God as the awesome and beautiful Lord of creation. It seeks to amplify the message of general revelation,⁵⁸ but, like idolatrous cultural discourse, redeemed cultural discourse does so in tension. The tension in the redemptive cultural discourse is part and parcel with that tension inherent to all of believing life in a fallen world—namely, the antithesis between the old man and the new, between this world-age that is passing away and the world-age to come, established in principle by the resurrection of Christ.⁵⁹

Redemptive cultural discourse is pulled between two poles. The first is our oneness with the fallen world that continually transmits the revelation of God's wrath, of humans as unwelcome, of cultural dominion lost (most forcefully emphasized by death as a return to a hostile earth, see Gen. 3:19), of decay, of bondage, and of futility (Rom. 8:20). This first pole speaks to the fallenness of our world and our solidarity as creatures with that world—what I referred to earlier as our not-at-homeness.

⁵⁸For some stimulating ideas about specific ways this can be done, see Calvin Seerveld's *Rainbows for the Fallen World* (Downsview, Ont.: Toronto Tupence Press, 1980), 10-76.

⁵⁹See Geerhardus Vos, *The Pauline Eschatology* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1986), 37. Because this tension has different histories for different communities of Christians, we should expect cultural differences between these communities. There is a danger that when I use terms such as "idolatrous cultural discourse" or "redemptive cultural discourse" that I might be misunderstood to be referring to two global cultural blocs. Rather, I use these terms to point to an antithesis of organizing and/or hermeneutical principles of popular culture, a cultural extension of the antithesis between the seed of the Serpent and the seed of the woman (see Gen. 3:15). Naturally, there will be a great deal of diversity within those broad cultural family groups.

The second pole is hope. Because we are part of the new creation (2 Cor. 5:17) and are actively being renewed by the Spirit (see 2 Cor. 4:16, cf. 3:18), our cultural vision is also being renewed. We gain glimpses of creation restored as in creation freed from bondage and reconciled to us (Rom. 8:21), and that affects the nature of our cultural discourse—the nature of our response to the dissonance of general revelation and the context in which we live. Hope trains our imagination to see differently and to follow that sight to restore culture through cultural activity (including work in popular genres) to its rightful task of glorifying God.

The redemptive cultural imagination will embrace both poles in its cultural activity: the reality of life in a fallen world and the reality of eschatological redemption instituted already in principle and as an active force by the resurrection of Christ.⁶⁰ Without the former, cultural imagination drips a saccharine optimism and is irrelevant to unredeemed culture (and false to general revelation). Without the latter, cultural imagination slips into despair (that is, absence of hope) that is indistinguishable from unredeemed culture. The redeemed cultural imagination impacts surrounding idolatrous cultural discourse by accepting and embracing the tension between the already and the not-yet. Christian culture needs to be done in an attitude of tensive hope because in this fallen world, “we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come” (Heb. 13:14).⁶¹

Conclusion: Toward a Christian Critique of Popular Culture

I have argued that both the standard evangelical and secular approaches to popular culture have, for various reasons, stripped popular culture of its status as meaningful discourse. Evangelicals, due in part to weak theologies of sin and grace, fail to understand popular culture as a meaningful phenomenon. They tend to dismiss, castigate, or uncritically imbibe popular culture. Secular cultural theorists suppress popular culture’s meaning in favor of appropriating its symbolic capital for political ends. Neither group really listens to the depth of meaning in popular culture. Only a theory of popular culture that takes the role of general revelation seriously can adequately account for that meaningfulness. Certainly, there is manipulation and temptation involved in popular culture, but much more remains to be said. There are political, economic, and semiotic elements to culture, to be sure, but none of these categories capture the depth of culture or the way popular cultural discourse transcends its own boundaries and gestures toward something beyond itself. That something else, I have argued, is a fundamental religious dynamic: the conversation, the argument between God’s general revelation and the human heart. That dynamic

⁶⁰Much of this language owes a great deal to professor Richard B. Gaffin of Westminster Theological Seminary.

⁶¹Many thanks to my wife, Carolyn, for suggesting this connection with Hebrews.

surrounds popular culture as its context just as creation surrounds us, and it is that dynamic that makes culture meaningful because God is the ultimate locus of all meaning. Cultural studies, as it stands, has surgically removed the heart from popular culture, just as the standard evangelical approach has ignored it. A better understanding of the connection between general revelation, the heart, and popular culture can return meaning to the study of popular culture, a genuine listening to its discourse, its divine-human subtext. Such listening sets the stage for a more potent hermeneutic of popular culture that may lead to a real critical engagement with popular culture, an apologetics of popular culture, rather than dismissing it as too many evangelicals do. Such a perspective on popular culture could also fill the void left by secular culture studies interested only in popular culture's political and ideological import.

To achieve such a critical perspective, we need a good theory of popular culture in order to lay the groundwork. Here, I have focused on the role of general revelation in popular culture theory, but more work needs to be done for questions remain to be addressed from a biblical perspective: How does popular culture inform cultural identity at the individual and communal levels? What is the best way to interpret specific popular cultural discourses? How is the conversation between general revelation and popular culture carried out differently at the levels of cultural production versus cultural reception? How does the conversation modulate according to different popular cultural genre? And so on.

If we as a Christian community truly want a balanced, relevant, and penetrating critique of popular culture, such work must be done. The present article is intended to contribute to building such a critique. It is my hope that an understanding of the role of general revelation in popular culture will encourage Christians to take popular culture seriously as a meaningful discourse. Whether we like it or not, popular culture forms our world. It *is* our world, the world of our children, and the world of our non-Christian friends and neighbors, and we, by God's grace, are called to it.