

## BOOK REVIEW

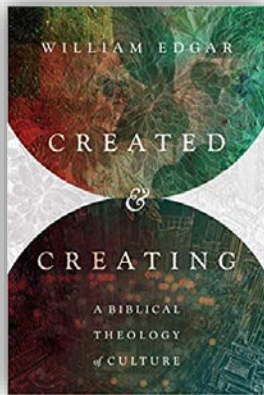
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# Created and Creating: A Biblical Theology of Culture

*By William Edgar*

Reviewed by Johnathan Norris

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Arguably since its inception, the church has struggled to agree on the proper way to interact with “culture.” In the past, some took monastic vows and became hermits, isolating themselves from the outside world. Others decided to harness the power of culture and take control. Presently, some Christians decry culture and seek ways to resist it, while others embrace the newfound freedoms that culture brings. Seeking to create order out of chaos, William Edgar in *Created and Creating: A Biblical Theology of Culture*, offers a definition of culture, as well as a Reformed and nuanced perspective on what the Bible says about it. I contend that Edgar does much to move this timely conversation on a Christian understanding of culture in a healthy direction.

In his Introduction, Edgar discusses the “realms of culture” and argues that “everything we think and do has a cultural dimension” (10). Edgar understands culture to “bind” together schooling and learning, farming, sexual identity expression, art, sports, terrorism, manufacturing and transportation, retirement customs, adoption and child raising, grieving practices, ecological care methods, and technology and its use. After painting this picture, Edgar then writes, “Culture characterizes our calling here on earth” (10), almost as if he is defining *culture* as our *calling*. The reader is suddenly and unexpectedly moved from the material

plane to the metaphysical. However, this seems to be by mistake, since Edgar argues later that *creating* culture is humanity’s calling. The reader, then, is left confused as to Edgar’s actual use of “culture” until much later in the book.

The first section of the book traces the history and significant theorists of cultural studies, both inside and outside the Church. Chapter one deals with non-Christian theorists including, Edward Tylor, Matthew Arnold, William Blake, Marx, Lacan, Deleuze, Baudrillard, Foucault, Derrida, and Geertz. In this first chapter, Edgar primarily highlights the development of cultural theory from Tylor’s “linear culture evolution” through Geertz’s move towards a hermeneutical approach to culture. In chapter two, Edgar reviews and critiques Christian theorists including, Niebuhr, T.S. Elliot, C.S. Lewis, Kuyper, Schilder, Shaeffer, various liberationist theologians, and missiologists. This second chapter, however, feels very out of place. Unlike the first chapter where Edgar concludes by arguing that non-Christian scholars can still teach Christians about human improvement, power and its abuses, and the diversity of culture, Edgar finishes the second chapter by providing only a one-sentence summary and no clear connection to the overall argument of his thesis.

The final two sections get to the heart of Edgar’s thesis and demonstrate his ability to do sound biblical theology. Before beginning his exegesis, however, Edgar informs the reader of his objective by stating candidly, “Simply put, the basic argument of this book is that the Bible teaches that cultural engagement before the living God is, along with worship, the fundamental calling for the human race” (87).

He begins by addressing the passages in the Bible that seemingly speak against cultural engagement. These passages include: the admonition to not lay up treasures in heaven (Mt. 6:19-20), the rich young ruler (Mk. 10:17-21), leaving one’s family to follow Jesus (Mk 10:28-30), Lot’s wife (17:32-33), gaining the world and losing one’s soul (Mk. 8:36), the claims of God vs. the claims of Caesar (Mt. 22:15-32), Jesus being not of this world (John 8:23), John’s command to not love this world (1 John 2:15; 3:1, 15; 4:3), Paul’s teachings on not conforming to this world (Ro. 12:2), warnings about human wisdom (Col 2:8), Christian marital standards (2

Cor. 6:14), the temporariness of the present world (1 Cor. 7:31; 2 Peter 3:10), and friendship with the world and worship of God being at enmity (James 4:4). Edgar notes how looking at these passages “without qualification” has led many Christians to argue against cultural engagement. The answer, however, is not to dismiss these passages. Rather, one must realize that these passages are not directed to God’s creation as such but the “malignancy of sin” (100).

Edgar reworks these *contra mundum* passages by demonstrating that the Bible, particularly in the New Testament, assumes cultural engagement. For example, Christians have to live out the Beatitudes, which center on “primary allegiances,” somewhere. In other words, a Christian cannot be a living sacrifice or salt and light on earth while remaining aloof from culture. Therefore, Christians can still participate in culture-making while remaining faithful to these passages. He summarizes his thoughts on the *contra* passages with:

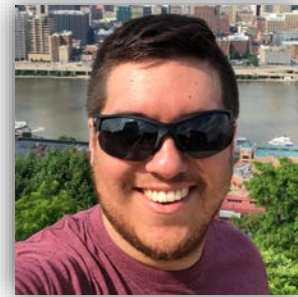
While we wait for the life to come, we do not simply evangelize, though we certainly do proclaim the gospel. We take on doing his will on earth, as it is in heaven. That will is comprehensive, not just so-called spiritual endeavors, but actually including the whole realm of human life: family, citizenship, farming, artistic pursuits—in short, *culture*.” (126) [Emphasis in the original].

Edgar then argues that the Bible gives a divine mandate to culture-create. He locates this theological foundation in the “cultural mandate” of Genesis 1:26-30, particularly verse 28, “God blessed them and said to them, ‘Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.’” Indeed, to procreate and pass on the teachings of Yahweh and to steward and take dominion over the earth requires creating culture. Without first creating culture, it would have been impossible for the first humans to communicate, worship, and steward their resources.

Furthermore, Edgar demonstrates that this divine cultural mandate survived the Fall. Even though systemic evil was introduced into the human race, God never rescinded his command to create culture. Edgar highlights the post-diluvian pronouncement to multiply and fill the earth (Genesis 8:17), as well as the call of Abraham and the subsequent creation of the nation of Israel (Genesis 12:1-3). He underlines the worship, monarchical, and aesthetic features of Israel, impossible feats without first creating culture. This Old Testament, divine cultural mandate culminates in the New Testament’s Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20). Not only are Christians supposed to create culture.

As they do, they are supposed to tell of the wonders of God.

There is no doubt that Edgar’s conclusions are sound and well-articulated. Unfortunately, however, he relies too heavily upon the Fundamentalist or Reformed theologies that undergird his approach to the biblical text. Though this does not weaken what he has to say, it does limit his potential readership to those who are sympathetic to an Evangelical or Reformed bibliography. Also, he could have eliminated chapter 2, “Biblical and Theological Reflections,” and simply introduced the theologians as they became relevant in his later arguments. This would have made space for practical ways that Christians could engage in a theology of flourishing and shalom. As it stands, *Created and Creating* never becomes grounded but remains an abstracted concept to the end, something Edgar does acknowledge in the Epilogue.



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