Welcome to “The Table,” where we discuss issues about the connection between God and culture, and our topic today is cultural engagement and culture making. Our guest via Skype is Andy Crouch, author of Culture Making: Recovering Our Creative Calling. And Andy hosted an all-day seminar here at the seminary awhile back, and we have wanted to follow up with him because he did such a great job. So Andy, welcome, glad to have you with us.

Andy Crouch: Thank you very much. So glad to be here. Wish I could be there in person. It was great when I was there in person. I loved being there.

Darrell Bock: Well, we really enjoyed having you. And then to my right here is Andy Seidel, who is the executive director of the Howard G. Hendricks Center for Christian Leadership, and we’re adding on “and Cultural Engagement.”

Andy Seidel: There we go.

Darrell Bock: And I am Darrell Bock, executive director of the Center for the cultural engagement aspect, so you’ve got the full team here as we discuss culture together. Andy, I’m just going to dive right in. Let’s talk first about a word that I think at the seminar you said is one of the most difficult words to define in the English language. With an introduction like that, I’m going to give you 30 words or less.

Andy Crouch: To define culture.

Darrell Bock: Define culture, yeah. What is culture and how should we think about it?

Andy Crouch: So I borrow a wonderful definition of culture from the journalist Ken Myers, and he sums up what I think a lot of sociologists and anthropologists take many more words to say. Ken defines culture as what human beings make of the world in both senses. That’s quite a bit under 30 words, so let me say just a couple more words about that. Culture is what we make of the world. By that I think Ken intends us to pay attention first of all to the material aspect of culture. It’s actually the physical production of human activity. It’s not just ideas. It’s not just values. It’s not just art or the works of imagination. It’s actually embodied, you might say, in very concrete things that people make.
Then it’s also, although it is material, it’s also the other sense of that phrase, “what you make of the world,” which is, it’s the human attempt to find a meaning in the world and to discover, if we can, what does this world signify. What’s the significance of life in this world that seems mysterious, beautiful, wonderful, terrible but doesn’t come with any explanation sort of written out or any obvious explanation just naturally? So it’s that combination of meaning making and material making that adds up to culture.

**Darrell Bock:** So when we talk about meaning making in particular, we’re talking about the fact that we as human beings invest the things around us and the combination of the way things interact around us with meaning.

**Andy Crouch:** Yes.

**Darrell Bock:** And the flip side of this is that although we make meaning for culture, culture also in very many ways shapes us as well. Because we aren’t born in a vacuum, we walk into this meaning making that’s going on around us, is that correct?

**Andy Crouch:** We come in thousands and thousands of years into the story of human beings making something of the world. And thank goodness we don’t have to start from scratch because we’d have to discover fire and invent the wheel, invent language. You’re absolutely right, and this is a very important aspect of culture is its kind of a reflexive and iterative nature. That is, it’s iterative. This process happens over and over again in one sense with every generation.

But in another way it’s reflexive in that we make it, but then it turns around and acts on us, most of all in human development. You arrive as a little baby, and the first thing you start to try to do is make sense of the world that you’re in. That world is just as much cultural as natural. So you start trying to figure out what all this means, including language and symbolism and music and stories as well as concrete artifacts. So culture acts on us and, in fact, I’m sure we’re going to talk later about should Christians be transforming culture, withdrawing from culture –

**Darrell Bock:** That’s where we’re going.
Andy Crouch: That’s where we’re going. It’s very important to remind ourselves that culture acts on us and transforms and shapes us much more than we ever shape it. I’m much more shaped by culture than I could in my wildest dreams hope to affect or shape culture, and that’s the reflexive power of culture.

Darrell Bock: I’m going to work our way there, and the way I’ll work our way there is to talk about the fact that really in many ways we aren’t just talking about culture as a single monolith, but culture itself is made up of many, if I can say, little cultures that are within it that also interact with each other.

I think the best way to illustrate this, and I’m going to bring in Andy here in a second on this, but when my wife and I moved to Germany for sabbatical, all the rules for marital interaction and what you could do in the society changed.

Andy Crouch: Wow.

Darrell Bock: Things that she could normally do here and happen effectively, she was cut off from doing in part because she didn’t know the language, so that was a little bit of a disadvantage. And then secondly, the culture responded to a woman doing certain things in a certain way that made it less comfortable for her to initiate that process, and so I had to step in. Our line was, “We moved and all the rules changed.” Andy, I know, has had a lot of experience in Eastern Europe. I’m sure you found the same thing, is that true?

Andy Seidel: Oh, very much so. We lived really outside of Vienna in Austria, and they had very different rules than we did here. For example, my wife used to walk every morning, and she’d walk the same path. She would see these two women, and it took really she said about three or four years before they would smile, and then it was another year before they would talk to her.

Darrell Bock: Okay. I don’t even want to know what kind of culture making that is, but anyway. But that’s the point. The point is is that what we view as culture here in, say, Dallas, which is where we are, or where you’re – where are you sitting these days?

Andy Crouch: I’m sitting in Swarthmore, Pennsylvania, right outside of Philadelphia.
Darrell Bock: Okay. So you’re outside of Philly. We won’t get into the Dallas-Philly thing in the NFL.

Andy Seidel: Yeah, that’s right.

Darrell Bock: Even within the United States, those are different mini-cultures.

Andy Crouch: Yes.

Darrell Bock: Then you turn around and you change countries, and the rules change yet again. It shows how complex culture is, correct?

Andy Crouch: Absolutely. And, in fact, I think you can make a pretty strong case that the idea of culture as kind of an abstract noun really emerged from encounters with different cultures. It’s sort of a cliché, but it’s a useful cliché, as long as you are a fish swimming in one little pool, you don’t think of yourself as being in the water.

People talk about culture that way. It’s very much in the background until you leave your home environment and you go to someplace where it’s fellow human beings, they’re Homo sapiens, image bearers just like us, but they’ve made something very different of the world, sometimes shockingly different, disturbingly different.

The attempt to give a name to all those different patterns of making is what we mean when we use the word culture in the abstract, but culture never exists in the abstract. It’s always the product of a specific history of people trying to make something of the world. It’s affected by geography. It’s affected by history, just by the happenstance of history. Just the story of what happened in Austria or Germany is different from what happened in Texas.
That has generated – you used a very interesting word, which is rules. One of the things cultures do is tell us how the world, not just how it is but how it ought to be. They impose sanctions, both in the sense of positive reinforcement and negative reinforcement when you either make the world the way it ought to be or violate the way the world ought to be. This gets to a very important point about all cultures. They’re not just sort of neutral background. They really do tell us what you are allowed to do. Are you allowed to talk to a stranger? What are you allowed to say to a stranger? They tell us what you can do, what you cannot do, and they really constrain human action as well as make human action possible.

This is one of the things I like to emphasize because when we think culture is just about music or art or even ideas or values, we can leave the impression it’s kind of optional. You don’t have to go to an art museum if you don’t want to. But you are bound to and bound by culture, and it is shaping your assumptions about what it is to be human every single moment of the day.

_Darrell Bock:_ If you’re a fish, that water is all around you whether you want it to be or not. _Andy Crouch:_ That’s right. And you need it as much as the fish needs it.

_Andy Seidel:_ Right.

_Andy Crouch:_ If we could somehow take you out of culture you’d be gasping. You wouldn’t know who you were. You would actually be less free than you are, even though culture also constrains your freedom. It’s a very interesting kind of paradox there.

_Darrell Bock:_ I don’t want to turn this into a seminary class on the abstract idea of culture, so I want to shift our attention a little bit. One of the other things you emphasized that I think people don’t normally think about when they think of culture is this idea that culture isn’t just ideas or values; it’s also the things that we produce that shape the way we live.
In the book you use the example of what happened when the interstate highway system came to the United States, and just the change that that meant. That generated all kinds of industry or it promoted some existing industries. It put pressure on other things that had existed and made them in some ways perhaps less valuable or changed where they fit. There was all this kind of cause and effect.

I think in our own lifetime here lately the thing that shows this more than anything else may be the little thing called the iPod, which when it showed up generated all kinds – it made all kinds of things possible. It also relativized, if I can use that word, a whole lot of other things that existed. So that’s another dimension of culture we often don’t think about that is culture making as well, isn’t it?

This is really why I ended up titling the book I wrote about this <i>Culture Making</i>, because it really is when we make things. The technical term for these I suppose is artifacts. You can also think of them, the phrase I like is cultural goods. Cultural goods are the medium by which even the most intangible parts of culture are expressed and made manifest and in a way enforced. When you make a new cultural good, it’s almost always both something very specific like an iPod, and usually there’s a whole system behind that. So you think about iTunes, the software behind the iPod, these very concrete goods along with the systems that support them. You can think about cars and interstates in the same way.

It starts to move the horizons of possibility for human beings. That is to say, some things become possible that were not possible before. There was no way for me to carry around my music collection with me wherever I went before the iPod and its immediate predecessors, MP3 players. Suddenly I can do that. Well, that then has all these knock-on effects, which are fascinating and important to understand because they really do reshape the way that we live.

But at the same time that some things are becoming possible, other things are becoming impossible. That is to say, the introduction of cultural goods doesn’t just expand the horizon so that more and more things become possible, it moves the horizons so that some things that were completely possible before are now all but impossible now. For example, making money as a record company was very possible in the –
Darrell Bock: With 45s, with 45 RPM.

Andy Crouch: Right. Certain artifacts become just artifacts in the archaeological sense, relics of another time. They had tons of meaning. For a person of a certain age the 45 RPM has all this significance, but to my 16-year-old son it means nothing, right? It doesn’t impinge on his life in any way.

That’s how culture works. It’s constantly moving these horizons. The important corollary of this is if we want to see culture change it’s not enough to change ideas, and it’s definitely not enough just to change hearts or attitudes. We’ve got to actually give people a way to act on those new ideas. Frankly, if you can provide a compelling-enough cultural good, the ideas and shape of life will follow that good rather than you having to convince them of the idea first. Sometimes the goods come before the idea. The invention of keeping time, clocks, first water clocks then tower clocks in Europe and then eventually watches, those things were invented and then reshaped the way people thought about time, rather than people saying, “We need to be more timely, so let’s invent a watch.” It didn’t work that way. It went the other way around.

Darrell Bock: Of course, sometimes when you invent something there’s – and this’ll be the last abstract question we deal with. Sometimes when you invent something there’s what you intend to do with it and then there are the consequences that come out of it that you didn’t even have in mind but that someone else who culture-makes does with it. It goes off in a direction – and it can go in any kind of direction, intended or not, which shows how dynamic culture is and how difficult it is to – if the word is difficult, my goodness, the whole phenomenon of culture is difficult because it’s like an untamed tiger in some ways.

Andy Crouch: Absolutely, and you really do not – no one has the capacity to predict what any significant cultural innovation will do. It’s too public, too many people act on it, too many people respond in unpredictable ways. One of the most remarkable results of the interstate highway system, well, the most remarkable result was suburbia. I mean, 50 percent of Americans, more than 50 percent now live in suburbs. Suburbs the way we know them now did not exist before the interstate highway system.
I think you might have been able to foresee that to some extent, but who would have foreseen the rise of fast food? Fast food is also an artifact of the highway system. You would not have these dominant fast food chains if we hadn’t had interstate highways. I guarantee you that when Dwight Eisenhower signed the National Interstate Highway and Defense Act, he was not thinking about McDonald’s being one of the largest companies in the world, but that’s a result. You never can foresee those kinds of effects.

**Darrell Bock:** Now, all of this means – I’m going to turn in a practical direction now. All this means that we need to be, if I can use this word, a little bit humble about how we think about culture, interact with culture, our expectations about culture changing. There’s a lot of Christian language today about culture changing. You’ve highlighted the issue of culture making in contrast. I want you to explain why that is and why that difference is so important to appreciate. I think we’ve set the context for that by what we’ve said.

**Andy Crouch:** Yeah. I know this first section has been kind of abstract, but it’s important, it’s foundational, because it chastens our pride or hubris, our overreaching. Part of why I wanted to call this book and this line of thought culture making is I started to hear these crazy verbs being thrown around, like, “We’re here to impact the culture.”

Now, the first problem with that is that is not a verb. I’m going to hold the line. I refuse to let impact become a verb. But I mean, that’s a very strong word. Impact, my fist impacts your cheek or whatever. The chance of any person or any group of people doing anything remotely like impact when you’re talking about something as complex, as multi-faceted, as responsive, as cumulative as culture is very small.

Even the verb, it’s a softer verb, but “transforming” culture, which Richard Niebuhr used in his book, *Christ and Culture*. His kind of punch line is, rather than being against culture or simply seeing Christ as being of culture we should talk about Christ transforming culture.
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When you turn that into Christians transforming culture, let’s leave aside what Christ may be doing, but what are we doing? I think it’s way overreaching to think that we can transform culture. That is above our pay grade by many steps. The problem is, if you set yourself up to try to have a transformative impact, you are likely to mortgage yourself to whatever you think can get you there. You will end up being implicated in all kinds of foolishness that you shouldn’t have been.

A very classic example of this is the way that the religious right in its quest to transform American politics, at least for a season, became very captive to other interests within the Republican Party. They were much more transformed by entering the Republican Party than the Republican Party was transformed by them. That tends to happen when you overreach in this way.