INTERVIEW

Interview with Dr. William Edgar

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PETER LILLBACK: *It's our great privilege to interview professor* extraordinaire *of Westminster Seminary, Dr. William Edgar. I'll ask him about his coming to faith and connection with renowned apologist Francis Schaeffer, about his work with the John Calvin Seminary at Aix-en-Provence, France, and finally about the recent publication of his book on culture* Created and Creating.[1] *Tell us firstly how you got to know Schaeffer and how that impacted your early life.*

WILLIAM EDGAR: It's an unusual story. I was a sophomore at Harvard University, an agnostic toying with atheism, but I had a professor at the college who spoke about the Christian worldview. I was quite drawn to this. His name was Harold O. J. Brown. He's now in heaven, but he and I became friends, and he talked about the Christian faith, and I was intellectually quite persuaded, but wasn't a believer yet. I was going back to Switzerland in the summer of my sophomore year with my brother to do a bicycle trip. Harold wrote on a piece of paper, "Francis A. Schaeffer" and a telephone number and said, "If you get a chance you might look him up. This guy is a friend of mine and an Evangelical Christian, like me." That's the term he used.

Halfway through the summer, my brother wanted to go home, and I called Schaeffer from Zurich. Mrs. Schaeffer answered the phone, was very warm, and invited me to come for the weekend. I thought, "This is amazing"; I went down there and found out why: it was a Christian community where

[1] William Edgar, *Created and Creating: A Biblical Theology of Culture* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2017).

the main teacher, Francis Schaeffer, would give seminars, hold discussion groups, and preach in the church.

PL: *How many people and who were there when you showed up?*
WE: Probably twenty-five. A good number of them were nonbelievers. There were one or two Christians who were struggling. That first night we had a discussion group where Schaeffer answered all kinds of questions. I remember one was about prayer, and I hadn't thought about this. I had said some prayers because my parents sent me to an Episcopal boarding school, but I'd never prayed to God. I wasn't sure there was a God, and it was a riveting discussion on the way God answers prayer, and if he's not there, prayer is futile. I'd never heard anything like this. So then, the next morning he had time to talk to me, and we spent about an hour and a half together. During that conversation I just knew it was true and I felt my heart change.

PL: *Did he share biblical texts with you about the gospel?*
WE: My main question was, "Even if Christianity is true, why is it relevant?" He gave about a forty-five-minute answer using what we call the free will argument for the problem of evil. It's an argument I've come to struggle with, as I think bits of it are true and bits are not. Doesn't matter. It was mightily used of God, and at the end of this conversation he said, "Why don't we pray together?" I said, "That sounds fine." He said, "Well, you start." "What do I say?" And he said, "Well, why don't you start off thanking the Lord for what he has just shown you?" So, tears streaming, I mumbled some sort of prayer, and then he finished.

And then I asked him if I could stay for awhile. And he said, "Well, we're very, very busy …" Little did he know that very busy in the 1970s would be 130! But they found room for me, and I stayed the rest of the summer and took part in the life. Our meals were shared with Dr. Schaeffer, then after, we used to walk down a road to Panex. Most questions we didn't want to ask in front of everybody we could ask in private, and he would answer them. He was just a remarkable resource.

PL: *Is that when you met Os Guinness as well? You dedicated your recent book to his honor.*
WE: Yes, I met him the next year in Boston when he was traveling with Dr. Schaeffer. He came to Park Street Church when I was still a student at Harvard and gave some speeches; and he was really the heir apparent, I think, in those days. We've been very fast friends ever since.

PL: *If you look back at those moments and the influence of Schaeffer on your life through his personality, friendship, and teaching, what would you say was his greatest contribution to the apologetic world and to you?*
WE: He was not only vitally important for the content of what he taught, but he modeled the way to speak the historic Christian position into the twentieth century. So even today, in conversations with people, with unbelievers, I often hear Schaeffer's voice in my head and think, "What would he say?" Then I try to be as wise as he, and so his influence on me is really monumental.

When I completed my final year at Harvard, I decided to go to seminary, and along with seven or eight of us from my class, decided to come here to Westminster. We'd been influenced by Edmund Clowney, who'd been up in Cambridge and spoken. We thought, "We want to be where this man is." When I came here, I studied under Cornelius Van Til, and he was the second monumental influence on me. How were Schaeffer and Van Til different? Put it this way: on all the fine points, doctrinal issues, and apologetic methodology, I would be a Van Tillian. He differed with Schaeffer on various issues, and I would have to agree with the way he criticized Schaeffer. On the other hand, Schaeffer was such an enormous personality and a gracious evangelist, and he had given his life sacrificially to spread the gospel to whoever went to L'Abri. Eventually he made films, wrote books, and in that way I would like to emulate Schaeffer. So I think I got the best of both worlds because these two great warriors started me off in the Christian faith.

PL: *That's great! So turning to your ministry, when you left seminary and began to serve, how did the Faculté Jean Calvin at Aix-en-Provence become central for your life and career? You spent eleven years serving there.*
WE: I grew up in France and Switzerland, and so French is in my blood. After seminary I was a high school teacher teaching French, as we had a child and I had to put bread on the table. They soon moved me into the music department, as I had majored in music at Harvard. The headmaster allowed me to go to graduate school at Columbia in ethnomusicology. We also founded a church in Greenwich, Connecticut, when I was teaching there.

Then a remarkable man named Eugene Boyer came into our lives. He was a dedicated missionary in France, and he and several colleagues in Aix-en-Provence had just founded or reopened a little seminary, the Protestant Evangelical Reformed Seminary, nestled in the University of Aix-en-Provence. They needed a professor of apologetics who had to be fluent in French and a Van Tillian, and other qualifications that narrowed it down. By French law, they were supposed to find a French guy first, but I don't

think they looked very hard, so my wife Barbara and I and our two children moved to France in 1979, and I spent eleven years teaching apologetics there.

It's a marvelous and unique work because it's the only historically Reformed Seminary in France. There is a seminary in Vaux-sur-Seine, near Paris, which would be the other Evangelical seminary. It is baptistic. We at Aix were the only historically Reformed seminary, and our mission was to renew the church and to send out church planters to found new churches, first in France, then in other French-speaking countries, Switzerland, Belgium, etc.

PL: *So there were Reformed seminaries, but when you say historic Reformed you mean maintaining a historic Calvinistic creed and confession?*
WE: Exactly. There were three other seminaries besides these two: one in Paris, one in Montpellier, and one in Strasbourg, but they were pluralistic and liberal. If you were an Evangelical and believed in the doctrines of the Reformation, Aix-en-Provence was basically your only option. And I'm happy to say more than forty years later, it's thriving, and enrollment is robust. I go back at least once a year to teach there and have had the privilege of teaching a French PhD student, Yannick Imbert, who's now the professor of apologetics, so Westminster is a conduit for good things! The professor emeritus of systematics, Paul Wells, was trained here at Westminster. There's a warm connection between our two seminaries.

PL: *Bill, how has your love for music impacted your ministry from those early years at seminary all the way through Aix? You mention ethnomusicology, so that's a fancy way of saying you're a jazz pianist. How does that all work into your theology and your ministry?*
WE: Well, marvelously, music and theology have always gone together. Martin Luther said something like if you can't sing it, it's not worthy of the name theology; and Johann Sebastian Bach was an amateur theologian. I have a special interest in jazz music partly because I love the music and grew up with it, partly because it has an amazing history, being generated by African Americans during slavery and beyond. While I was at L'Abri I met a remarkable teacher who ran the Dutch L'Abri, Hans Rookmaaker; he was a European expert on early American jazz. He gave lectures on the origins of jazz, blues, and spirituals. I love this music and played it and thought, "It is wonderful that I can love it even more as a Christian, for Christian reasons." So I've always tried to wed music into whatever ministry I was doing. Even today I have a jazz band and do concerts where we explain the gospel illustrated with music. I go to ethnomusicological and

musicological societies and read papers; music has been a very important part of my life.

PL: *Does jazz sound different through French ears or American ears, or do we all hear it the same?*
WE: I've thought about this a lot and written on it.[2] The appropriation of jazz in France is a fascinating story. The French were the earliest people to appreciate jazz for its African American aesthetic. They appreciated it more than a lot of white Americans. Early jazz heroes like Louis Armstrong and Sidney Bechet and others found in France a home and much appreciation. So, the French care passionately about jazz. There are even rival jazz clubs that disagree on the canonical list of acceptable jazz. In Paris today there are twenty jazz clubs with the best kind of jazz. When we moved to France, it was no trouble to find jazz lovers and to form a little band and do concerts. Whenever I go back, I try to play with some of these old friends. So the short answer is that the French love jazz; the longer answer is that there are reasons to do with French music, a close affinity of people like Maurice Ravel or others with the principles of jazz. And then French people endured terrible suffering under the Nazis and much else, and so, since jazz emerged out of a people deeply acquainted with suffering, they felt a kinship with that moaning and outcry that comes with jazz. Jazz is a joyful music, but its joy emerges through the valley of the shadow of death.

PL: *Okay, so Schaeffer and Van Til and jazz, what's the connection between those three?*
WE: Schaeffer actually loved jazz music, and his friendship with Hans Rookmaaker deepened it. Now, I never talked to Van Til about jazz, though I imagine he knew about it. I don't know whether he enjoyed it or listened to it, but the theological connection is that both Schaeffer and Van Til taught a kind of apologetics known by the somewhat awkward name of *presuppositionalism*. We're trying to change that to *covenantal*. I don't know if that's much better, but the idea is that apologetics should not be simply proving to others the Christian faith by using bits and pieces evidences out of context, but it should take into account the foundations of unbelief and challenge those at the level of unbelief. And jazz has deep foundations originating in a believing community. The greatest jazz musicians grew up in the church. Jazz owes its beginnings to the history of the spiritual, which

[2] For example, "It Don't Mean a Thing If It Ain't Got 'le swingue,'" in *It Was Good: Making Music to the Glory of God*, ed. Ned Bustard (Baltimore: Square Halo, 2013), 199–217.

owes its origins to the music of enslaved Africans who cried out to the Lord. So there are deep affinities theologically between this music that's called jazz and those theologies that deal with the problem of evil and with grace, joy, and love. So that makes a wonderful marriage between the kind of apologetics that we teach here and the kind of aesthetic principles that jazz embodies.

PL: *It's a great joy for us to talk to you about your recent book,* Created and Creating: A Biblical Theology of Culture. *Your life has been shaped by many significant influences that make you uniquely qualified to write a book like this—international background, mastery of different languages, study at Harvard, musicology, jazz piano work, mission work, cross-cultural living, teaching and research at Westminster. What was the impetus for your writing this book?*

WE: Thank you, Peter. Those are very kind words, not deserved. The impetus was there, as ever since I became a Christian I believed in the interface of faith and culture. In the study of this interface, I was most convinced by the tradition of Abraham Kuyper, Francis Schaeffer, Cornelius Van Til, and Klaas Schilder. While I benefited from other traditions, I always wanted to write a book that would defend that approach from a biblical theological standpoint, and I wasn't aware that that had been done. There are other books, such as Albert Wolters' *Creation Regained*,[3] but none of them does the kind of biblical theology that I wanted to do.

PL: *How does the cultural mandate give direction in building a biblical theology of culture?*

WE: Biblical theology is the recognition of the Bible's revelation particularly in view of its historical unfolding and culminating in Jesus Christ. In this book, I defend the ongoing validity of the cultural mandate. The cultural mandate is the term used by Schilder to describe God's first orders; his first commandments to our parents, Adam and Eve, and by implication to the rest of humanity. Culture, as I understand it, is subduing the earth to the glory of God in an unfolding manner that brings more and more of his attributes and his virtues to light so that we can herald them. Despite the fall, God has provided a way for us to continue to obey the cultural mandate. And there are many reiterations of it in the Old and the New Testaments. I pause over many of them in the book, not all of them, because there are too many.

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[3] Albert M. Wolters, *Creation Regained: Biblical Basis for a Reformational Worldview*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005).

PL: *There are other uses of culture than the one you are developing; in fact, some would say the culture's dangerous for the Christian. Your book talks about the negative texts or the* contra mundum *texts about staying away from the world. How do we put together the positive sense of culture that's developing and the danger of a culture that's antagonistic to God?*

WE: Certainly both are true. I love what the Apostle Paul says: "Prove all things." In other words: try them out. "Retain what is good and eschew what is bad" (1 Thess 5:21–22). Culture is one of those areas of life we need to try out, some of us by practicing the arts, others, business, law, family life, and so forth. All these aspects of culture need to be proven, and we need to hold onto what is good, which the Word of God outlines for us. It's still good to work, have family, honor the civil magistrate, and then to eschew the evil (and there's plenty of evil in human culture). Christians are meant to be salt and light. Sometimes in Scripture the world is presented positively, as the place God made and loves. Sometimes, it's presented negatively, particularly in places like First John that tell us to avoid worldliness (e.g., 1 John 2:15–17). We have to discern which aspects of culture are for us to enjoy, embrace, and promote, and which are for us to stay away from. Worldliness in John's sense means the temptations to idolatry, to lust, to self-aggrandizement, works of the devil, not the works of the good Lord. So, those warnings are dire. They are not warnings to stay away from all culture, but to stay away from the cancerous, sinful culture that has invaded us.

PL: *So there are two concepts: common grace and antithesis, the tension of the Christian with the worldly system. How do those two work out, and who are some of the theologians behind those ideas?*

WE: Common grace is a concept that comes out of Scripture, but it was noticed and developed by Calvin and, of course, Kuyper and Van Til. God continues to look with favor on both his elect and nonelect people. And that favor is not despite the fall and the antithesis, but it's in view of the antithesis. He shows he is gracious and patient even to people who are not responding to the gospel. In the end, the antithesis will be fully expressed in the judgment. After that, it won't be possible anymore for unbelievers to exercise their gifts, but as we wait, the wheat and the tares are growing up together, and there's a mixture, as it's not yet the time of judgment. By God's common grace we're to engage in the world alongside unbelievers, fully aware that there is an antithesis. In fact, you couldn't call it grace if there weren't an antithesis. We're in the time of God's patience, and he is calling unbelievers to himself and giving gifts to all kinds of people, whether they be followers of Christ or not. Common grace is an important part of

the idea of culture for Christians. Culture is one of those areas where God has proffered a great deal of common grace to people who don't believe in him. Medical advances and artistic output and so forth—some of it is quite extraordinary but not produced by believers.

PL: *How then would you contrast, say, Marxism, postmodernism, and historic Christianity as ways of interpreting culture?*
WE: Karl Marx is a very important voice, perhaps the most influential modern commentator on economics and society. Basically, his view of culture is in terms of class struggle, so it's about power. Revolution when the proletariat rises up against the bourgeoisie who have power over them is inevitable.

PL: *So they would destroy music and art and science in the name of that cultural view?*
WE: Well, they bring their own. They would not destroy all music and art. Marx had a certain place for music and the arts, as did Hegel, but he was so worried about the confusion of the arts with economic power that he encouraged the proletariat to revolution and the destruction of the entire system. It never quite happened that way, even in Russia. However, Marx taught us there is a power dimension to culture, and that can be a good thing or a dangerous thing. Christians have been slow to see the power dimension.

PL: *What is its successor, would you say then?*
WE: Globalization, maybe, the increasing interconnectedness of every part of human life. Certainly economic but also communication, transportation, and most importantly the idea that as an interconnected person I have an awareness of the world that preglobalized people didn't have. That gives me the feeling that I'm a global person. Some of that is good; some of it is not good, because we disperse ourselves into what we *can* do rather than concentrating on what we *should* do. One of the positive effects of globalized culture is that it has opened up windows to cultures and peoples with whom we wouldn't have had contact. In Washington a couple of weeks ago I went to a seminar on Balinese gamelan music which exhibits beautiful orchestras from Bali; I was enriched by the beauty created by this wonderful music. Negatively, globalization can have the effect of steamrolling local cultures. So you can go almost anywhere in the world and American pop music is much more listened to by young people than their own indigenous music. As Christians we learn that we have tremendous opportunity to preach the gospel all over the world, but we have to be aware that we shouldn't bring

unwanted cultural accoutrements rather than developing local culture which can be redeemed. Properly armed with cultural awareness, Christians will see power for what it is but be aware of its dangers, will see globalization for what it is but be aware of its negatives, and then bring the gospel in its totality through the means that God is making available to us today.

PL: *How does the Great Commission connect with the cultural mandate? Do you see continuity with the missional call? How do those two connect in biblical theology?*
WE: Following Harvie Conn, another of my mentors, the Great Commission is the cultural mandate recast appropriately in a fallen world in need of grace. So, like the mandate given to our first parents, it tells us to multiply and spread all over the world. Unlike the cultural mandate, it tells us to do that as gospel heralds. Like the mandate to our first parents, we're to subdue the earth, and some of that still goes on, but in addition to what Adam and Eve knew, we bring the Lordship of Christ our Redeemer to bear over every area of life. One of my favorite texts on that is Colossians 1:15–20, where the second person of the Trinity's mediatorship of creation is compared to his mediatorship and his reconciling of all things in the era of the church. Like the mandate given to our first parents, it's under God's covenant blessing. Jesus said, "All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me, and lo, I am with you to the ends of the age" (Matt 28:18, 20). So, it's the same, but in a far more greatly enhanced and corrective reiteration, since there has been sin and the need for grace to overcome it. There's continuity, but fulfillment, progress, and enrichment.

PL: *So is there a definition as to what culture is that everyone would agree on, or is that impossible?*
WE: I think it's pretty impossible. After working on this for a long time, I've got my little definition, restating the cultural mandate and applying it to cultural analysis. "Culture characterizes our calling here on earth. It distinguishes our common humanity, but also our differences. Culture can be positive, leading to human flourishing, or negative, bringing corruption and abuse. Components of culture are numerous and varied, making generalizations difficult. And although value judgments should be made cautiously, they are appropriate."[4] Some remarkable scholars and commentators, both Christian and non-Christian, help us to understand the way the world works and its culture, but there is also a cultural dimension to the gospel, which transforms every area of life and changes culture. Finally, it's

[4] Edgar, *Created and Creating*, 10.

important to look at both the meaning and the power dimensions of culture. So culture carries meaning—it's full of symbols—but it is also about power in a good sense: authority and proper exercise of institutional values. All of that is wrapped up in the call to humanity today, particularly to redeemed humanity, to engage in the cultural mandate as it's been enhanced and been interpreted in the Great Commission.

PL: *Should Christians be involved in politics and political parties?*
WE: Absolutely. It's a loaded question because there are ways to do politics and ways not to do politics. In the 1980s some false hope was expressed by conservative Christians that if we could only participate in the American political process we would see great change, but it doesn't seem to have happened. Part of the reason is that perhaps we were naïve in the way we were engaged in politics. Politics is a complicated, somewhat unclean business, and without the gift and a willingness to mix it up with people you don't agree with and arrive at compromises, you won't be effective. Christians should get involved in politics. Some are called to be professional politicians, most of us are called to be politically aware, to vote, to participate in the local politics we know. It's interesting to note that some of the people who are the most angry with the way things have come out in the recent election, on either side, are those who didn't do much locally to begin with. And some of them didn't even vote. I have little sympathy for that. Politics isn't going to save the world any more than the arts or business, or any other kind of false messianic hope. We are in a battle at each level and in every sphere for God's righteousness, and we can do our part and see a bit of progress if we keep our goals modest and don't think of a giant culture war where the white hats have to win everything. We are just to do God's work and beg him for revival and awakening.

PL: *Do you believe that a healthy view of culture from a biblical perspective mandates some sort of a public proclamation, a public theology, and if so, how does culture inform that task?*
WE: I believe very strongly that theology ought to be public in the sense that many of the issues that theology deals with are of interest to the public. Go through Jesus's teachings, and it is hard to find any that are just private. His views on government, his views on poverty relief, his views on family, these things are of deep importance to the public.

PL: *How did some of the great names in the Christian tradition impact your work—C. S. Lewis, Francis Schaeffer, Cornelius van Til, and Os Guinness? How*

have they shaped this book?

WE: The four of them in very different ways. Lewis oddly, but perhaps tellingly, was quite hesitant to engage in culture in his theory. In his practice, he did a lot of that. So I wrestle with him a great deal because he is one of my heroes. I think his hesitancy with culture is because he doesn't want it to replace the worship of God with something earthly, and thus he is zealous to guard against any idolizing of culture. He sees culture as a preparation for the gospel, maybe as a means to nurture our imagination, which is a wonderful way to be ready for seeing what God sees, but he did not advocate a Kuyperian kind of cultural transformation.

Schaeffer was all about cultural apologetics. He not only used illustrations out of every realm of culture but practiced cultural engagement at L'Abri. For example, we had an arts festival there which was very popular and encouraged young artists to come and learn to paint and sculpt and dance and so on. So he was very aware of the incarnation of the gospel into cultural areas, and in some ways he was ahead of his time. For example, his little book called *Pollution and the Death of Man* was prescient about the dangers of pollution, not just ecological dangers, but aesthetic dangers.[5] He wrote a book about the arts, and about the rise and fall of Western civilization.

Van Til didn't say a great deal directly about cultural engagement, but he constantly referred to Kuyper, the Kuyperian tradition, and to the wisdom of unbelievers, and his area of specialty was philosophy, so he was very aware of that, and he also enjoyed literature. His presuppositional apologetics really grounded me in the possibility of cultural awareness.

Guinness has written extensively about culture; although he's primarily a sociologist, he's very aware of history. A couple of his recent books, *Renaissance* and *A Free People's Suicide*, detail the cultural reasons why the West is losing its civilizational saltiness.[6] He has this remarkable ability to find people who can have insights into why things are going one way or another. One of my favorite books of his is called *The Call*.[7] He marshals an array of people who either said good things about calling and were called to do something good, such as John Newton when he gave up slavery, or bad things, such as Picasso when he became obsessed with painting and couldn't free himself of his pagan obsessions. So, one of the reasons that I dedicated

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[5] Francis A. Schaeffer, *Pollution and the Death of Man* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1970).

[6] Os Guinness, *Renaissance: The Power of the Gospel However Dark the Times* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014) and *A Free People's Suicide: Sustainable Freedom and the American Future* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012).

[7] Os Guinness, *The Call: Finding and Fulfilling the Central Purpose of Your Life* (Nashville: Nelson, 2003).

the book to him and Jenny is they've been such mentors, friends, and supporters. Also, Os opened my eyes to historical and social trends that I might not have seen without his teaching. He basically says Christian apologetics has been so tied to philosophy and the theistic proofs that it has ignored the social dimension of human existence. So he pleads for the sociology of knowledge, plausibility structures, and almost single-handedly changed the awareness of much of the Christian community on these things.

As we come up to the Reformation celebration next year, I was looking at Luther, who famously said, "Three areas of life are in dire need of reformation: the preaching of the Word, government, and the family." Luther's Protestant Reformation was culturally aware, and without building on those shoulders we probably wouldn't be doing what we are doing today.

PL: *So your book on culture came out on the five-hundredth anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. What reformation do you hope your book will have on our understanding of culture, and how are you standing on the shoulders of the Reformers?*

WE: It would be arrogant to suppose one might begin a reformation! If people read it and were inspired, I hope they might recapture the seriousness with which the greatest Christians in history and our biblical heroes have celebrated culture, whether it be in awareness of cultural trends or the cultural dimension of missions and worship and in the transformation of culture. That's not triumphalistic. It's simply obedient. If people could read the book and be encouraged to engage culturally, I would be encouraged. Although I have convictions in this area, I don't spend a lot of time in the book criticizing other views. Some of them get a walk-on part, but I wanted the book to be mostly positive and cause people to reflect.

PL: *Is there anything outside of the sweep of culture, and how does culture lead us into the* eschaton*?*

WE: Culture is the primary calling of the human race; nothing is outside it. However, properly speaking, God is not a cultural being. He created culture. He interacts with it, and the gospel comes with cultural clothing, but he's outside of it. While worship—where we directly pray to God, honor him, and sing to him—has a cultural dimension, it is hardly a cultural activity. Anthropologists study human worship and they think of it as a cultural thing, but that sounds relativistic to me, as it doesn't directly fall under the purview of culture.

PL: *So is there culture after the end comes and the new beginning is upon us?*

WE: I believe so. I've a little chapter on that in the book. Some of it is from Revelation, some of it is inference. When Jesus says, "I will make you a ruler of five cities or ten cities" (Luke 19:17, 19), while that may not be completely literal, there's no reason to think there isn't rule over some entity like a city or a human grouping, a cultural pursuit. When Revelation tells us the kings come marching into Jerusalem with their glory (Rev 21:24), the word glory probably has a reference to something like their treasures, a cultural concept. When the world is destroyed (2 Pet 3:7), I don't believe it's the good part, the positive cultural redeemed aspect that's destroyed, but it's the cancer. What will remain will shine forever, although we don't know what culture is going to be like in heaven. Lewis speculated on it, and it's fun to do that, but we don't know. We do know that we will be spiritual beings, as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15 and that the center of heaven will be Jesus Christ. Even as spiritual beings worshiping him, whatever cultural activities there will be will be in order to draw us closer to Jesus, and the details I'm dying to find out.

PL: *Is there jazz in heaven too?*
WE: That's a hard question, actually, because if you say no, that means that all the skill, the music, the improvisation, the compositional devices that make jazz or any other kind of music are extraneous, irrelevant. I'm willing to say that the kind of music we create here, to the extent that it glorifies God, and maybe to the extent that it needs further redeeming, will be in heaven. All that music in the book of Revelation has got to be set to some tune. Is it going to be some unearthly, never-heard-before tune? I doubt it, any more than the words are.

PL: *So you conclude your book by focusing on principles and guidance to help us think culture through. How would you like someone to take this book and apply it in a specific area as they wrestle with issues of culture in their own calling?*
WE: My biggest hope would be that they would do just that. I'd like them to develop deeper thinking about the political realm, the family, the self, and the art, and then take some of those principles and apply them not just theoretically but concretely. Steve Turner has written a beautiful book called *Imagine* about the biblical worldview in the arts, and he's a poet himself and a journalist and so forth.[8] Calvin Seerveld has done it in the visual arts, and James Skillen in the public, civic realm.[9]

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[8] Steve Turner, *Imagine: A Vision for Christians in the Arts* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001).

[9] Ed. note: see James W. Skillen, "Witness in the Public Square," *Unio cum Christo* 1.1–2 (Fall 2015): 159–71.

PL: *On some of the highlights of your work, is there something you'd really like to say?*

WE: You mentioned the *contra mundum* texts, which seem to say, "Don't have anything to do with the world," therefore, "Don't have anything to do with culture." I argue that's not what's being said. One of my favorite places to go when we're talking about the ongoing validity of culture is in 1 Timothy 4, where Paul warns his young friend and the rest of us that in the last days there will be doctrines of demons that will say things like "Don't get married" and "Don't enjoy food" (1 Tim 4:3). I go into some length about why Paul picked those two areas, although he could have picked others. But I think marriage says something about God's good intentions for us as families and how celibacy in itself is no virtue. Again, going back to people like Luther and Calvin. Luther thought extensively and wrote about the evils of celibacy. He said, "If there's one in a thousand who are called to this, that would be a lot." While he talked about the temptations of staying celibate because you can't handle it, he did so more about the beauties and the virtues of family. Carl Trueman argues that the Reformation did as much for removing a celibate culture and transforming it into a family culture as anything else.[10] And then food, because in the New Testament, and to some extent still today, there's the cult of salvation through diet. The more sophisticated versions are gnosticism, but there were all kinds of teachings that if you abstain from this or don't do that, then you'll be with the other elites in the line to be enlightened. And Paul rails against this because the gospel is not about slavery to eating rules or any other rules, it's about a relationship with Jesus Christ, and that, too, is part of the cultural mandate. We're to not only subdue the earth in every area of life—in agriculture that means producing food that's good—much of the celebration in the Bible is around the table, and heaven is portrayed as a banquet table with the Lord. So that text shows us how God loves us to be culturally engaged and how the opposite of that is a doctrine of demons (1 Tim 4:1).

PL: *Talking about the Reformation, Calvin was struggling with music and some of the arts. Did the Reformed faith go wrong with Calvin, and have we corrected it? How do we celebrate our great forefathers in this regard?*

WE: I tremble, but I'm going to say it: Calvin was a bit shortsighted in this area. He loved literature and knew about classical culture. He was not anti culture, but he was zealous to purify worship and to rid it of distractions, and maybe he threw the baby out with the bath water. That's why he wanted

[10] Carl R. Trueman, *Luther on the Christian Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 175ff.

only psalms and a couple of other canticles sung with the sparsest music. The French translations of the Psalms are beautiful. But even that he wanted them translated and rendered into poetry is a bit of a contradiction. In his great zeal to reform worship there was a kind of iconoclasm which went a bit over the top, for instance in taking the organ out of Saint Peter's church.

Kuyper argues that taking the arts out of the church meant placing them where they really belong, which is in the world of culture. As a Dutchman he says that when the paintings and visual images were taken out of the church they were put into the hands of extraordinary artists, and he celebrates the golden era of Dutch landscape art, and Rembrandt. I appreciate his zeal to justify Calvin, as he has a point that Calvin's worldview had great implications for the arts. But that worldview was only put into application in the arts generations later.

Maybe the Lutherans did a better job. The Reformation was a wonderful time, but it was not a golden age, and we need to build on what's good and look again at what needs to be developed and refined. It's a happy thing that Reformed Christians are rediscovering the role of the arts. We hope they don't idolize them, necessitating another reformation of iconoclasm. But it's a happy development, and I think it's one that Calvin would have approved in seed form had he gone to sleep and woken up several centuries later.

PL: *Would you say that sinfulness can affect our aesthetic impulses?*
WE: Sure. Calvin was aware of the sinful impulse to take visual objects and in the name of venerating them actually to idolize them. Following Erasmus and the others he thought the easiest way was to just get them out. But there's a reverse kind of sinful reaction, which is that if I purify my life and live in just a white living room and have no art, anywhere, so that I can think I'm safe. But that doesn't work either.

PL: *Well, Professor Edgar what a joy to hear your reflections on your life, your ministry, and your work on culture. What do you want to give us as your concluding salvo in this interview today?*
WE: One of my mottos, which was encouraged by African American people that I've spent a lifetime studying, is not to seek happiness but to seek joy. And the difference is that happiness is the superficial emotion that makes us feel good, like if we had only dessert in our meals. Joy is a deeper emotion that is profoundly grateful and free, having been through the dark places and having tasted the way God can bring us through. As my students know, I like to say neither optimism nor pessimism are biblical. The difference is the optimist thinks we are in the best of all possible worlds and the pessimist

fears he may be right. And the problem with pessimism is that it is not dark enough. So Jean-Paul Sartre was a pessimist, but he's a lightweight compared to the author of Ecclesiastes, which really is dark because our view of sin is terribly dark. My former teacher C. John Miller used to say, "Cheer up, you're far worse than you think," but then he would quickly add, "but God is far greater and more powerful than you think." So, optimism isn't bright enough. Optimism is Pollyanna, things are going to turn out OK, whereas hope, Christian hope, means that things are going to turn out OK, but it's not things that we're deeply worried about, but our relation to God. If that turns out all right, then I can be a truly joyful and hopeful person. If everything else goes well but I don't have that, then life's not worth living.

PL: *Thanks so much, Bill.*