

Book Review  
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*Popcultured* by Steve Turner, Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013, 254 pp., ISBN: 978-0-8308-3768-7. Cost: \$11.00.

Steve Turner authors a book that examines the main features of our popculture and evaluates its impact upon believers. He is balanced in his approach as he attempts to discern and distinguish the good from the bad in our present culture. Some of the facts he presents are revealing and help us to evaluate our present culture in light of the Scriptures.

The book is comprised of an introduction and fourteen chapters which cover the following topics: leisure pursuits, popular culture, working it out, cinematic art, journalism, celebrity culture, fashion, every-greater thrills, comedy, advertising, technology, photography, TV and movies, and a final chapter on What Should I Do? The final features of the book include notes, a question and answer session with Steve and a name index.

Turner makes an interesting statement in the introduction, “I wondered this because I think family, friends, work and popular culture (or leisure activities in general) are where the rubber of our theology hits the road of our ordinary lives” (p. 7). Every person should be concerned with how their faith interacts with culture.

In chapter one, Turner explores the question, “What has popular culture got to do with the Christian faith? He then explores ten reasons why this is an important question. Here is a list of the ten areas: (1) the divided mind—they have nothing to do with each other; (2) people create popculture with the intent of altering perceptions (influencing the thinking of other people); (3) popculture is a great gift to us and we should take it seriously; (4) Christ is the Lord of all life including what we participate in relating to our culture; (5) most of us spend a significant amount of our time interacting with popculture; (6) popculture can be a useful indicator of the “spirit of the times”; (7) popculture is a place of debate and negotiation—it tells us what others are thinking; (8) if we do not pay attention to popculture, we have very little chance of influencing it; (9) God can address us through popculture; and (10) people who don’t accept spiritual realities are responsible for most of the serious academic exploration of popculture.

In chapter two, Turner defines popculture. The basic meaning of the word relates to its derivation from the Latin term *cultus* which described tilling the land. Culture was thought of as something that cultivated people. Culture is a means of change. Culture is a reflection of the values and beliefs of people who live in community. These values and beliefs are reflected in the popular arts, design (fashion, buildings), mass media including radio and TV and the Internet, recreation, lifestyle (*the whole way of life* which is also a definition of culture), and pop art and pop music. Popculture refers to elements of our society (film, television, advertising, comedy, fashion, magazines, newspapers, spectacles, photography, the Internet and celebrity culture (this list is not exhaustive) that are generally mass-produced, predominantly consumed during leisure hours, overwhelmingly created for financial gain, don’t require a specialist education in order to be appreciated and are usually capable of being enjoyed by a broad, nonelite audience (pp. 39-40).

Turner gives some biblical parameters for dealing with popculture in chapter three. The author indicates that the Bible recognizes many of the foundations of culture. He relates that Roman citizens enjoyed playing games, listening to poetry recitals, exercising, bathing, taking part in competitive sports and attending gladiatorial matches and chariot races. “There’s no

mention of Paul participating in these things.” However, Paul does mention boxing, wrestling, exercising, running and winning sporting prizes in the context of the pursuit of spiritual realities. (p. 45). Paul was aware of culture. Culture is not wrong in and of itself. When people live in community with other people culture is made. Jesus made things out of wood (He was a carpenter). Paul made tents. David wrote poetry and played on musical instruments. Noah built a boat. Turner’s next point is that culture benefits us. “Culture is one of the ways God stimulates our intellects, soothes our troubled minds, reveals the wonder of life, gives us insights into the feelings of others, softens the blows of misfortune, provides memory triggers, challenges our assumptions, trains our eyes to see, reveals to us both beauty and ugliness, exalts our spirits, delights our sense, makes us laugh and reveals aspects of his character” (p. 47). All culture is not evil. Consequently, we must use spiritual discernment to separate the wheat from the chaff. Priorities are a significant part of this activity of discernment. Also, the wise and judicial use of time. Turner gives a warning as well. Popculture is a sphere for Satan to do his work and so produce “spiritual warfare.” Paul states that we must test all things and hold fast to that which is good (I Thess. 5:21). Our culture can desensitize us to evil by constant exposure to evil. Culture can be used as a tool to change beliefs and values over time by gradual assimilation. Turner states, “It’s not hard to understand the attractiveness of popular culture to the devil. It is an opportunity to have your product—sin and rebellion—placed in the context of pleasure, in front of an audience of billions” (p. 51). Turner calls for vigilance when consuming popculture. Popculture can be used to change and so affect our “thought lives.” The subtlety and persistence of this effort has the power to change our thinking about God, the Bible and the essence of life itself. There are times when we must resist and reject certain forms of our culture. There is a clash of culture with the beliefs of the church of Christ that will test the faith of believers. This is one of the most formidable challenges facing the church today.

Beginning with chapter four, Turner explores different aspects of popculture. Chapter four addresses cinematic art. Touching on the prevalence of attendance at movies, Turner states, “There’s more widespread recognition of an illustration from *Titanic* or *Terminator* than from a poem by Billy Collins, a novel by Philip Roth or even a parable told by Jesus” (p. 60). Movies are powerful ways of telling stories and they impact people emotionally. This emotional impact can be very persuasive and becomes an avenue of changing values and beliefs. Movies can be used for good or for evil. Believers must critique what they view and make righteous judgments about content.

Chapter five addresses the topic of journalism. Turner states, “One of the most powerful ways popular culture affects people is through unexamined assumptions” (p. 82). One way these assumptions enter journalism is through biases. “...magazines and newspapers are naturally biased toward sales, immediacy, the values of the owner, deadlines, the visual, bad news and stories that have clearly defined protagonists and antagonists” (p. 82). They can be biased toward a particular political party. Turner gives several examples. One such example is the magazine *Men’s Health*. The magazine promises coverage of everything a man needs to be fitter, healthier and happier. However, the magazine totally ignores the soul. This reveals a bias against the spiritual aspect of man’s nature. Turner comments, “By excluding the spiritual, *Men’s Health* promotes the purely material as normal, as all that needs to be considered when pursuing happiness and well-being” (p. 83). Turner makes an interesting observation concerning reality TV. “The events covered by reality TV are pseudo events that create pseudo stars (people whose only achievement is to have been filmed) whose lives off-screen then create further pseudo events” (p. 85). Reality TV is a misnomer. There is nothing real about it. It is an attempt to

create a false reality and influence people through this false reality. Turner further explores the definition of news; infotainment where the trivial is put side by side with the important creating an atmosphere where the weird and the coarse can become cultural norms; embedded values revealing the personal values or ideological slant of the journalist; and loaded words where the connotation of words makes a difference illustrated by the words well-built, fat, and obese.

The aspect of popular culture that Turner addresses in chapter six is celebrity culture. Turner reveals that celebrity is often contrived by building an aura about a person that commands attention. Attention begets attention. The goal is to be gazed upon covetously by millions of people. Celebrity worship is a way of being drawn into our culture and accepting the values and beliefs of the celebrity as our own. Pop star Jarvis Cocker noted that, "Becoming famous has taken the place of going to heaven in modern society. That's the place where your dreams will come true. It's an act of faith now. They think that's going to sort things out" (p. 101). Turner reveals that fame often destroys people's lives rather than being a measure of success. He also reveals that at one time interest in celebrities goes back to a time when we believed that human greatness was an indication of a flash of the divine. Fame was based upon character and accomplishment. Now, fame is based upon image and perception which is created by press agents and managers. Today, celebrities are used to advance causes and promote products with which they have no expertise. Because almost everything a celebrity says is quoted, celebrities wield an opinion-shaping power disproportionate to their wisdom, knowledge, and maturity. Celebrities have entered the political scene and exert influence on voters to promote their causes and ideologies. Christians should check their own thinking about celebrities and resist worshipping them and giving their words more weight than others especially God.

In chapter seven, Turner focuses on fashion. He quotes James Laver who states in his book *Style in Costume*, "They are nothing less than the furniture of the mind made visible" (p. 114). Laver was speaking of one's clothing. The clothes we wear reflect our hearts. When we suffer from low self-esteem, we may choose clothing that we think will raise our status among our peers. Our clothes can reflect pride or vain-glory in our hearts. They can reveal sexual inclinations. Our clothes can reveal rebelliousness or perhaps affluence which we desire to flaunt to make a statement about who we are. Blue jeans are the most ubiquitous item of clothing in the world (p. 115) because they are symbolic of American culture. Blue jeans represent a change from an item of work wear to an item of leisure wear, sexuality, and affluence. Turner states, "Designer labels easily become contemporary idols, if by *idol* we mean something that encourages extravagant devotion" (p. 121). There are many idols in our American culture. It is not surprising to find clothing named as a possible one. Turner writes that modesty has two meanings. One is having a moderate estimation of who we are. The other is being decent and observing propriety (I Tim. 2:9-10). Once again, our clothing reflects our heart.

Chapter eight focuses on the search for sensation. Entertainments are diversions. Why? They divert attention away from the real issues of life. A pleasure seeking culture may be attempting to escape from the realities of life, i.e. death, pain and suffering, loneliness, war, and our own sinfulness. Entertainments are also a remedy for boredom. Turner states, "Until the eighteenth century the word *amusement* meant something that deceived or cheated" (p. 131). It has come to mean something that delights or pleases the senses. Most entertainments give temporary relief to modern day pressures and stress. When we make pleasure the object of life and pursue it continuously we distort reality. Fantasy must not become a substitute for reality. Technological developments have increased our capacity for maximizing sensation (p. 134).

There is a quest for greater thrills, shock, and excitement. This creates a **seduction** to indulge the desires of the flesh. Turner relates that in 1988 Joe Pine and Jim Gilmore coined the phrase the *experience economy*. Their argument was that economies begin with commodities, move to goods as they begin manufacturing, create services and then, finally sell experiences. They illustrate this with coffee. The commodity (coffee beans) would cost 2-3 cents. After the beans were roasted, ground and packaged, they would cost maybe 10-15 cents as goods. Bought as coffee from a stand (a service industry) they would cost 50 cents to a dollar. Starbucks sells an experience and a cup of coffee could cost 3-5 dollars (p. 137). We desire an experience. Consequently, Starbucks is very successful. Turner warns against the constant quest for greater thrills. We find God in times of tranquility. “The “noise” of popular culture can rob people of the quiet time necessary to think about ultimate issues” (p. 141). He also warns churches about trading in experiences. “The church should be a place where those frazzled by sensation can come for rest rather than be faced by even more artificially induced thrills” (p. 141).

Comedy is the topic of chapter nine. Turner shows the importance of comedy in our lives. He also shows that humor is found in the Bible in hyperbole, irony, wit, pun, satire, paradox and epigram (p. 145). “The comedy culture produces shows what it values, despises and believes” (p. 146). Turner indicates that prior to the 1960’s censorship kept TV and radio free from anything “obscene” or “likely to corrupt or deprave.” No one had said the F-word on British TV until 1965, when theatre critic Kenneth Tynan said it during a live broadcast. It resulted in four motions in the Houses of Parliament and an apology from the BBC. Eight years would pass before it was used again. Today a typical edition of the BBC TV’s *Thick of It* uses the F-word over forty times in a half-hour edition, and the comedy show employs a “swearing consultant” whose job it is to make the obscenities more creative and memorable (p. 148). Christian audience members need to decide how long to stay around if the humor becomes degrading or hateful (p. 148). Spiritual discernment is an absolute for determining what cultural amenities to consume and what to reject.

Chapter ten turns the readers’ attention to advertising. Turner begins the chapter by noting the history of advertising. Turner notes, “The primary question we should ask of advertising is, Is it true?” (p. 161). However, it is difficult to answer this question in the 21<sup>st</sup> century because “contemporary advertising doesn’t work by supplying information that can either be verified or discredited...” (p. 160). Advertisers today use different strategies such as suggesting a mood, creating an association with the consumer, or implying the possibility of change to sell their products. Turner lays bare the strategies used by advertisers to get us to buy their products. One area of concern is subliminal manipulation. Subliminal advertising was outlawed in Britain, America and Australia in 1958 (p. 167). However, in the James Bond movie *Skyfall* (2012) the filmmakers Sony and MGM were given \$45 million by the Dutch beer maker Heineken in return for having Bond drink their brew rather than his traditional vodka (p. 167). Why would a beer company pay so much money to have their product used in a movie? The subliminal suggestion was powerful enough to make the cost worthwhile. Christian consumers need to be vigilant.

In chapter eleven, Turner takes a look at technology. He begins the chapter with this statement, “Nothing has altered the landscape of popular culture more in recent memory than the digital revolution” (p. 172). If this is true, then this chapter is one of the most important in the book. One revelation that Turner gives in the chapter is the use of the Internet to form a “global consciousness.” He also indicates that the Internet represents postmodernism in that sites like Wikipedia permit anyone to enter information about any word or topic. How reliable is

information like this? The final authority is vested in individuals who respond to the site. The information that they provide may or may not be factual or true. Cyberspace is full of dangers for Christians. The creators of the Internet wanted to change the world. It remains to be seen if it for the better or the worse.

The author addresses photography in chapter twelve. Photographers help shape our thinking about the world. Photography can focus attention on a particular issue or plight. Photography can also subtly influence our interpretations about what we see. Photographs can be manipulated with sophisticated technology to deceive us. Photography influences motivation and choice. It can influence social change. It can communicate a worldview. Christians can use this medium to their advantage.

Chapter thirteen focuses on TV and movies. Turner indicates a change of approach in this chapter. In the previous chapters he addressed the Christian understanding of popular culture. In this chapter he addresses popular culture's understanding of the Christian. How is Christianity viewed through TV and movies? Turner shows that Christians are not in the majority among those who make decisions concerning TV and movies. The people who run the television and movie industries do not share the values of Christians (p. 206). Christians are portrayed using many different stereotypes. They are shown to be hypocrites, ignorant, and repressed. Most of the time, they are shown in a negative light. Many of the movies of Biblical epics fall short of representing the truth from the Bible. Turner mentions a few success stories with one example being *The Passion of Christ*.

The final chapter of the book considers what the Christian should do with pop culture. Turner suggests: consuming critically, critiquing faithfully, and creating wisely.

The book concludes with notes on every chapter, a question and answer session with Steve and index of names.

The author has done an excellent job of showing how the Christian worldview interacts with pop culture. Spiritual discernment is very important. But, spiritual discernment must rest upon God's Word and God's righteousness. Christians can critique their culture accurately and truthfully only when their minds are thoroughly fixed on God and His Word.