



Your Stapler Is Making Assumptions: an Interview with Andy Crouch, Part 1

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Article:

"We make choices about what kind of business we are going to create, what the business is going to make, and how the business is going to make it." (Andy Crouch)

Andy Crouch's most recent book *Culture Making* is one of the best things we read in 2008. Not that we were surprised. We've followed Andy's work since he became director of the [Christian Vision Project](#) at *Christianity Today* in 2005.

He spoke with us recently about what it means to be a culture maker in our ordinary jobs.

>> [Read Part 2 of our interview with Andy Crouch about faith, work, and culture.](#)

Andy, your book is called *Culture Making*. What does it mean to make culture?

I chose that title for a couple of reasons. First, I realized that the only way you change culture is to make more of it.

This is important, because very often Christians have thought that the way you change culture is by criticizing it loudly and repeatedly or even by imitating it, by copying it. But those strategies don't actually change culture very much, if at all. Culture only changes when we make culture.

Also, I think we've missed how tangible culture is. We think of culture as this vague, abstract sort of ether that permeates everything. We hear about the fish swimming in water; it doesn't know it's in the water. And, we feel—well, that's what culture is like. Of course, there is some truth to that; but culture is actually made up of tangible goods, actual things.

Like omelets?

There are several recipes hidden in the book; and you know, that's culture. So is the chair that I'm sitting in; so is the house that I'm in right now; so is your office building; so are Interstate highways—something else I talk about in the book a lot.

When we see that culture is actual, tangible things and that any meaning or value that culture transmits comes through tangible things, then we start to realize, "Oh, I actually can affect this in some way—perhaps a small way—but I can create something."

Whereas, if we only think about culture at the level of meaning and value, we end up thinking that our job is to simply analyze meaning and value. We become philosophers of culture, but we don't become creators of culture.

You talk about cultural artifacts in the book—are you saying that every act of creation has meaning behind it?

Almost always. Anthropologists use the word "artifact," but my favorite word is "cultural good," because it kind of has that sense of something good and something specific. Initially, every cultural good is created by a small group of people who sense that something is lacking in the world.

So what's the cultural good of my stapler?

(Laughs) Oh my goodness. Actually, there are all sorts of meaning and values encoded into your stapler—the value of organization. It's better to make that pile of paper into a single thing rather than separate sheets that can be scattered around. Now, they're going to be read in a linear form.

So, there's a preference encoded into that for reading straight through a document rather than being able to spread out its pages or scatter its pages.

Is that a moral value to prefer linear reading over something more scattered?

I'm not saying that all cultural goods necessarily have a moral component; but they do address questions of how the world should be. And, the stapler says the world ought to be organized.

This is not something that all human cultures have taken for granted at all. I was in Kenya a couple of years ago, and I got to go on safari, which is what, I guess, most Americans do when they go to Kenya.

We flew over the bush on our way to the Masai Mara, and we could see these human settlements from the air, very

irregular little enclosures where they keep their cows and where they live.

When you fly over the U.S., you see grids and circles, and the same in Europe; but when you fly over the bush in Kenya, you see these irregular, sort of, roughly circular shaped things. These are human cultures that don't place the priority that we do on measurement and order.

Is one system better than the other?

It's hard to say actually. In Kenya, they preserve certain kinds of possibilities in their relationships with one another and in their relationships with the environment that we find very hard to capture.

Even very concrete things—like your stapler or like the way we shape our human settlements—encode a certain set of assumptions about how the world is and how it ought to be.

The way we shape our businesses must reveal quite a bit about how we view the world as well.

Absolutely. We make choices about what kind of business we are going to create, what this business is going to make, and how the business is going to make it.

Every set of choices opens up one set of possibilities, but also closes down other possibilities. So, you can't have a really nice neat tidy desk with everything stapled and, at the same time, have a range of options and free-flowing creativity that you could have if all your pages were spread over your desk.

We have to make choices.

In a way, human culture is just a constant reevaluation of our horizons of possibility. How well do they work for us?

And, every human culture senses they don't work quite right—there are some things that are possible that should not be possible. And, there are some things that are impossible that should not be impossible. So, we're constantly asking what could we create or how could we move those horizons a little bit?

What does culture making look like for an employee in a business?

You've raised the question of cultural power. We have the sense that some people are more able to make culture than others, because they decide in a very tangible way what widgets we make and what widgets we don't make.

And so, if I'm not the person with ultimate cultural power, can I create anything at all? Of course I can. Every human being is given a creative capacity by God. And, most of us, especially in our western world, can exercise that capacity in our paid work.

Not everyone. Some people really do have machine-like jobs, but they can create in other spheres. But, I'm guessing most of the people who will read this interview have a certain degree of freedom in their work.

Even though we're employees who have responsibilities to bosses or companies or stockholders?

We're responsible, not just about creating, but also cultivating—keeping what's already good, good. The whole reason we have our job, often, is that our employer hopes that we'll do a better job than someone did before.

That usually involves looking at what has already been done and asking, "What should I cultivate here?" What is good enough to just keep doing because it has been done very well?

What about employees who want to do something new? Who ask, "What hasn't been done before?"

I think many, many jobs have room for that question. What is missing that I could create? Every job should be a fully human, dignified activity. Say I'm working at a fast-food restaurant. Can I shape the culture of the front counter in the way that we interact with our customers? Every time I serve someone, can I relate to them in a slightly different way than has been customary in this particular restaurant?

And over time, I will change the culture by my choices and by working with my fellow employees, even though our manager may not care or may not have thought to ask us to do it.

So there's hope for the employee who is dissatisfied, thinking "I can't be a culture maker, because I'm too insignificant." In fact, they're not recognizing the power they do have.

Exactly. And, here's the great irony. When we start thinking about cultural power and what we can change, everyone feels insignificant. This is the great difference between power and money. Some people in the world wake up in the morning, and they have more money than they know what to do with. Their biggest problem is how to spend it and give it away wisely.

But, no one—not Bill Gates, not Warren Buffet, not Carlos Slim—wakes up in the morning and says, "I have enough power." We all wake up and think, "There are things I would like to change in the world that I cannot change, no matter how much of myself I invest or how much energy I exert." And, that's actually true.

Employees often find it hard to imagine that they may be more free than the owner or CEO of the business. At least

theoretically, the employees have the option of changing jobs and leaving. The owner has to sell or close it down to get out of it. So, in a way, they feel more constrained.

We all feel the sense that we're overmatched by the cultural challenges we face. But when we focus on that, we miss the fact that God has given us power. There is no other word to use. God has given us the ability to create something new—even if it seems very small.

How do we learn to be content with small? In the book, you talk about culture being made on a small scale; but we live in a world of megabrands.

I'm not sure it's exactly that we have to be content with small, although we have to start out being content. Contentment is a radical and deeply Christian idea. Why am I content with my relatively small lot in life? It's because God is big, and I'm part of God's big story.

Now, that being said, even megabrands are going to feel small to the people who actually run them. They don't feel like they have their hands on the levers of matchless power. Every brand has competitors; every brand is a few years away from irrelevance. As near as I can tell, I can't think of any exceptions.

So, it's a change of mindset. It's not about how big the lever is that I'm pushing on. That's always going to feel very small. But I believe there's grace at work—a kind of a tailwind behind what I do. However small my work may start out, God is going to multiply what's really good in my work in ways that may end up being huge over generations or centuries.

>> **Read Part 2 of [our interview with Andy Crouch about faith, work, and culture](#).**

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