

Welcome and Introduction
“Why a Forum on Faith and Culture?”
Dr. Nathan O. Hatch

Welcome to the inaugural meeting of the Forum on Faith and Culture. We hope this will be an annual educational event to explore the context of the Christian Faith in modern culture. The goal is to bring significant and exemplary leaders to Winston Salem to help us understand better our own faith and how we live that out in a complex world. What does it mean in the early 21st century, in a city like Winston Salem, to live thoughtfully and faithfully as a citizen of two kingdoms? I want to thank the host committee for their work in organizing this event. Their names are listed on the screen; and I want to thank First Presbyterian Church, and its senior pastor, Peter Barnes, for being our host.

I think it is important for people of faith to grapple with questions of faith and culture in this time and place for at least four reasons.

First, we are powerfully influenced by the culture in which we live, and thus need to understand its undertow. Like a swollen river, the culture in which we live has a powerful, sometimes irresistible, influence upon us through television and movies, music and advertising, tweets and blogs. Its power is increasing as we give over more and more of our waking hours to digital media.

Christian Smith, a sociologist at Notre Dame, has written extensively, for instance, on what teenagers and college students actually believe. He concludes that the dominant belief today is that everyone should decide for themselves. The absolute authority for every person’s beliefs or actions is his or her own sovereign self. Individuals are autonomous agents who have to deal with each other, but do so as self-directing choosers. “The words duty, responsibility, and obligation feel somehow vaguely coercive or puritanical.” Moral reasoning is largely based on a subjective feeling of right and wrong. As one young adult said, “Morality is how I feel, because in my heart I could feel it.” The typical bywords are “Who am I to judge?” “If that’s what works

for them, fine.” “Each person decides for themselves.” “Whatever floats her boat.”

The digital devices to which all of us are now connected reinforce and idealize this kind of radical individualism: It is the “I” phone, which proclaims that “you have the right to be unlimited.” Another smart phone claims it was “reinvented around you.” “I Tunes” offers music as you want it, when you want it, where you want it. Each individual has the power to project themselves on Facebook and Snapchat; and Netflix will suggest just the movies that fit your preferences. Pandora will draw upon thousands of albums to cater to your own personal taste in music. This is just one simple example of how the culture in which we live is molding us powerfully day by day. And thus we, as people of faith, must work hard to understand it.

Second, even when we turn to normative or religious judgments and convictions, we have trouble escaping the cultural norms of our age. There is a great tendency in this age, as there has been in the past, for people of faith to be carried along by strong cultural currents, so called climates of opinion. We too easily imagine that our beliefs are being molded by our faith, when they can, in fact, arise from even deeper cultural assumptions and convictions.

This is particularly true today where so much of our culture is stridently partisan between conservative and progressive beliefs. We have progressive television and conservative television, progressive political candidates and conservative political candidates, progressive digital networks (magazines, blogs, tweets, postings) and conservative ones. We self-sort into ideological islands. And some ministers, right and left, easily endorse one candidate or another, as if that is the natural thing to do.

The question for all of us is whether our faith has become culturally captive rather than a shaping force which just might transcend or challenge any one political persuasion. What is really shaping our structure of belief? What if our religious beliefs do not easily conform to one of the standard maps that our culture puts forward. How often do we stop and wrestle with how Christian reasoning should shape our own views of, say, immigration, poverty, public

education in poor neighborhoods, religious freedom, medical care—or an endless array of other issues.

As an example, I recall the consistent ethic of life, the seamless garment proposed by the late Cardinal Joseph Bernadin. He opposed abortion and euthanasia, on the one hand, but also capital punishment and militarism, on the other—views which did not square with any political party in the U. S. My point is that the deep categories of the progressive-conservative cultural divide today can unwittingly shape our faith. And it takes hard work to sort out wheat from the chaff.

A third reason for engaging questions of faith and culture is that we have come to live in a much more radically pluralistic society. In our work, among our neighbors, with parents of our children’s friends, in our colleges and universities, we rub up against people of strikingly different convictions, people of goodwill but who do not share our convictions. Rival stories are at the door always offering a different account of the world. Many have managed to construct a world of significance that isn’t at all bothered by questions of the divine. Belief in God is one option among many, and thus contestable. We have moved from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be on option among others. Many people live today in what Charles Taylor calls an “immanent frame,” finding significance without the divine. That, Charles Taylor has said, is a titanic change. That kind of pluralism has come less rapidly to the South, the Bible Belt, but it is rapidly on its way. You and I might hold the exact same beliefs as those of our grandparents, but how we hold and express them is very different if all around us there are competing, even opposite, claims. What does it mean to live faithfully in that kind of pluralistic, contested culture?

The final challenge flows out of the first three. How in a world, whose media pressures us into its mold, how in a culturally polarized society and one where pluralism is the norm, how do we, as believers think about and engage the world. Do we retreat from it, or oppose it, nurturing the church as a band of true believers in a hostile culture, exiles in Babylon--as the Anabaptists

did, or Stanley Hauerwas might suggest? Do we go about our business, aware of the deep tensions between the city of God and that of humanity, but finding common cause wherever possible, as Luther suggested? Or do we engaged culture, even attempt to transform it, which has traditionally been the Reformed and Presbyterian perspective. What is our approach as individuals, and as churches, to the community in which we live? How do our responsibilities to the broader community compare and contrast with those we have to the Christian community? What do we do separately as a church community, with whom do we make common bond? How do we go about charitable efforts, community renewal?

None of these are simple questions. They require serious thought and reflection. What H. L. Mencken noted in his day may be even more true of our own: “For every complex problem, there is an answer that is clear, simple--and wrong.” The burden of this forum is to take up serious reflection on the important and complex issues of faith and culture. Thank you so much for being here for this maiden voyage.

We are privileged that the inaugural speaker for the Forum on Faith and Culture is Andy Crouch, who has been a wonderful spokesperson for how a Christian can engage contemporary culture. For ten years he was a campus minister with InterVarsity Christian Fellowship at Harvard University. He studied classics at Cornell University and received an M.Div. *summa cum laude* from Boston University School of Theology.

Andy is executive editor of *Christianity Today*. He serves on the governing boards of Fuller Theological Seminary and the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities. He is also a senior fellow of the International Justice Mission’s IJM Institute. His writing has appeared in *Time*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and several editions of *Best Christian Writing* and *Best Spiritual Writing*.

He is the author of three books, Culture Making: Recovering our Creative Calling, Playing God: Redeeming the Gift of Power, and his latest, Strong and Weak: Embracing a Life of Love, Risk and True Flourishing.

Andy is also a classically trained musician who draws on pop, folk, rock, jazz, and gospel. He has led musical worship for congregations of 50 to 20,000. He lives with his family in Swarthmore, Pennsylvania.

Andy, we offer you a warm welcome to Winston-Salem.