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ORDERED BY LOVE:  
MAKING CULTURE THROUGH  
TRUE COMMUNITY

By Andy Crouch

CULTURE IS A FUNNY THING. MANY OF THE CULTURAL GOODS AND SYSTEMS THAT MOST DEEPLY INFLUENCE OUR LIVES ARE VAST AND COMPLEX—COCA-COLA, THE TWELVE-TONE SCALE, THE MANDARIN DIALECT OF CHINESE. THEY SHAPE THE WORLD FOR LITERALLY BILLIONS OF PEOPLE.

And yet every cultural good begins with a small group of people—and not just a relatively small group, but an absolutely small group. The optimal size of this small group? I suggest three. Sometimes it is four or five, and even two can occasionally pull it off. But three is the perfect number.

Three people can fit in a Mini Cooper (barely) with room for luggage. Three people can talk on a conference call, convene around a table in a meeting room, or chat online without anyone getting bored or distracted or feeling superfluous. Three people can sit in a single booth at a restaurant and hatch plans.

Now, for any cultural good to reach its full potential, the efforts of more than three people will be required. There will need to be concentric circles of people around the initial three who join in refining and shaping the three's initial proposal. But the surprising pattern that emerges when you start studying the propagation of cultural goods is that these concentric circles are never very large. They may not be absolutely small—the size of a group that could fit in a compact car—but they are always relatively small: relative, that is, to the size of the culture that they affect.

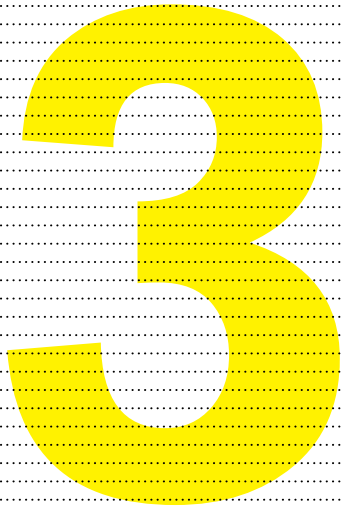
And the optimal size for these concentric circles, I would suggest, is twelve and one hundred twenty. These circles are still small enough that they can include people who know one another's faces and names, who are intimately acquainted with one another's talents and limitations, who know how much to trust and how much to verify.

This is not to say that all cultural goods stay at the level of intimate personal relationship. Most of the readers of my book, *Culture Making*, are not my geographic neighbors and have never met me in person. But the actual making of the book was entirely dependent on personal relationships and intimate collaboration: the product of the three, the twelve, and the one hundred twenty. In the circle of three were a publisher, an editor, and an author; in the circle of twelve were an editorial director, a marketing director, publicists, designers, and a few trusted reviewers and readers. In the circle of one hundred twenty were the endorsers whose comments appear on the dust jacket; editors and producers at magazines, newspapers, and broadcast media; and some key friends who helped shape the content, strengthen the concepts, and spread the word.

The astonishing fact is that as small as the numbers 3, 12, and 120 seem on the scale of human culture, groups that size are the only ones that have any chance of changing the world.

### 3 : 12 : 120

Once you start looking for the pattern of 3 : 12 : 120, you see it everywhere. Movie credits: an executive producer, a producer, and a director (3); the other producers and key crew members (12); the crew (120 or more—because a major motion picture is one of the most complex cultural goods our society creates, up there with jet airplanes and computer operating systems). Companies of almost any size: the so-called C-level executives (CEO, COO, CIO, CFO)—3 to 5 leaders; the board—12 or so; the key staff, which in small businesses is the whole team, and in larger businesses may be the leaders of various business units. The founders of Google—two former Stanford graduate students, Sergey Brin and Larry Page—added a third executive, Eric Schmidt, when their company began to grow. The executive branch of the government of the United States comes down to a surprisingly small group of people: the president, the chief of staff, and one or two of the president's most trusted advisers.



ers; the Cabinet (admittedly, at this writing it numbers 20—a bit more than 12); and the people who can reasonably expect personal access to the Oval Office in any given week (not much more than 120—the entire list of appointed White House staff, including assistants and deputy assistants, is only 49).

When the Poincaré Conjecture, one of the trickiest and most obscure problems in mathematics, was finally proved early in the twenty-first century, the key contributors were Grigory Perelman, Richard Hamilton, and William Thurston—the three. The number of people in the entire world who were qualified to confirm that the proof actually was complete and correct was not much more than twelve. And the number who could explain the proof's significance to fellow mathematicians probably numbered a few hundred at best—even though the proof of the Poincaré Conjecture has effects on fields populated by hundreds of thousands of specialists that shape the horizons for billions of human beings.

This distinction between absolutely and relatively small groups is important. At the small end of the 3 : 12 : 120 pattern is an

absolutely small group. At the large end is a relatively small group—small, that is, relative to the cultural domain for which the cultural good is intended. So the 120 is a more flexible number than the 3. The Ford Motor Corporation, one of the giants of modern American industry, has about 300 “senior-level officers”—still a relatively small group compared to the scale of its worldwide operations. Yet its executive leadership—CEO and CFO, plus three executive vice presidents—numbers only five, an absolutely small number.

On the other hand, a business like a catering firm that serves a small town may have its owner and one or two key employees (the 3), its most trusted suppliers and workers (the 12), and perhaps just a few dozen people, whether customers or friends, who often refer new business to the firm (its version of the 120). The 120 for a small business may actually be much less than 120 people, but it is still a relatively small number of people compared to the thousands of people a catering firm may serve over the course of a year at weddings and banquets.

The essential insight of 3 : 12 : 120 is that every cultural innovation, no matter how

far-reaching its consequences, is based on personal relationships and personal commitment. Culture making is hard. It simply doesn't happen without the deep investment of absolutely and relatively small groups of people. In culture making, size matters—in reverse. Only a small group can sustain the attention, energy, and perseverance to create something that genuinely moves the horizons of possibility—because to create that cultural good requires an ability to suspend, at least for a time, the very horizons within which everyone else is operating. Such “suspension of impossibility” is tiring and taxing. The only thing strong enough to sustain it is a community of people. To create a new cultural good, a small group is essential.

And yet, the almost uncanny thing about culture making is that a small group is enough. To be sure, the distribution of a cultural good may require hundreds of thousands or even millions of people. At the end of the day, there is a profound mystery to which cultural goods are taken up into the wider culture—whether that is the global media culture or the pattern of life on a city block—and which fail to reshape the horizons of possibility. But even the most influential cultural goods began

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with a group of 3, 12, and 120 who invested their scarce time and talents in its creation, often with nothing except their own confidence or hubris, or an unaccountable sense of grace, to assure them of success.

## The Good News of the Three

Scripture, of course, is also the story of 3, 12, and 120. God's first decisive cultural intervention, narrated in Genesis 12, is the choosing of a people, beginning with an absolutely small group of people: a nomad named Abram, his wife Sarai, and their household. The biblical shorthand description of that first stage of cultural intervention names the firstborn males of the first three generations: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—three men linked by blood, risk, and shared stories of astonishing personal encounters with the God their ancestors had only dimly known. Then the circle widens to Jacob's twelve sons and their families—the 120. From this very small beginning—as God pointedly says, “the smallest of all the nations” (Is. 60:22)—emerges a distinctive cultural tradition extended through time and space.

So when Jesus sets out to redeem the cultural project called Israel, he uses the same pattern. The synoptic gospels stress

the pivotal role of the three disciples closest to Jesus—Peter, James, and John—whom Jesus invites most deeply into the disclosure of his extraordinary mission to be sacrifice, model, and source of a new way of living in the world. Jesus chooses twelve men to be close to him at the key moments of his teaching and demonstration of the kingdom. While Christian imagination has focused on “the twelve,” it is clear that many women were just as close to Jesus as the twelve male disciples (at the crucifixion and resurrection, they were much closer indeed), and the band of disciples was even larger still.

At one point Jesus sends out seventy disciples in pairs to proclaim the kingdom he is inaugurating (Luke 10), and just after the resurrection, in the days leading up to Pentecost, there are 120 believers gathered in Jerusalem (Acts 1:15). Three, twelve, seventy, one hundred twenty—through these concentric circles of men and women the kingdom of God's distinctive cultural goods began to reshape the cultural horizons of Judea. God's own culture making, for all its universal scope through millennia and across continents, flows through absolutely and relatively small groups of people—perhaps because

the original creative initiative that is the prerequisite for any human creativity came from an eternal society of three Persons, united in their loving purpose.

The pattern of 3 : 12 : 120 is marvelously good news. Faced with the immense scale and scope of culture, we often retreat into postures ranging from condemnation to consumption. We feel overwhelmed, justly concerned about many features of our culture that we will never be able to change. The temptation to withdraw or accommodate, to get away or just go along, is strong.

Yet nearly every human being—certainly everyone who reads this article—has a three. Your three is an absolutely small group of people whom you know and trust, with whom you share passion and conviction and commitment, with complementary gifts, talents, and needs. You may even be part of more than one such small group, though probably not more than a few.

And your three has a twelve—a handful of others whose passions, interests, gifts, and commitments are closely linked with yours, people who would be quick to help

The only cultural goods that ultimately matter are the ones that love creates.

if you gave them the chance. It may be harder to see or believe that the twelve have a one hundred twenty, and the actual number may be slightly smaller or larger, but they are there, waiting for something worthwhile and compelling in which to invest their time and energy.

The crucial, central fact is that all of us have a three—and none of us have a large number of threes. When it comes to culture making, we are on relatively level ground in this respect: we all will make something of the world with an absolutely small number of people, many or most of whom are already intimately involved in our lives.

At first this may not seem to be true. The president of the United States can phone anyone in the country, perhaps the world, and reasonably expect them to take his call. Hollywood moguls and celebrities and chief executives have bulging Rolodexes and access to resources that most of us do not have. Aren't they the real culture makers, with the rest of us simply pawns in their game of power?

Yet on a daily basis, in how many people can the president put his trust? Who helps him decide which phone numbers to dial?

It's an absolutely small number—somewhere between three and twelve. Whom does a producer talk to before deciding whether or not to greenlight a movie? They are on speed-dial on his cell phone, and there aren't more than ten or so, no matter how extensive the research and preparation that go into the decision.

On the other hand, there are many forms of culture that even the president cannot touch, and this too is limited by his or her access to personal relationships. The president could make a big splash at the elementary school in our neighborhood by scheduling a visit there, perhaps to announce some dramatic new legislation—for a day. But our neighbor Beth, who has invested several years in relationships with other parents, administrators, and teachers can create culture in our school district in ways that the president of the United States cannot. Her 3, 12, and 120 include creative partners who are essential to making the culture of our school district what it is, and the relationships and trust they share are inaccessible even to the president of the United States.

### **Finding our Calling**

Absolutely no one makes culture alone. There almost always are periods of solitude where

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we work alone to shape our contribution to our own cultural sphere and scale. But for our work alone to bear any fruit at all, we will need to join with a three. So one of the most important questions for our calling is, Who are your three? Who are the few people you trust enough to risk creating something together? What is the cultural sphere and scale where you could imagine successfully proposing a cultural good? Who might be members of your twelve? Who might be drawn into the circle of the one hundred twenty who will eventually lend their effort and energy to moving the horizons of possibility with you?

The quest for the three, the recognition that all culture making is local, the willingness to start and end small, all seem to me to be the only approaches to culture making that do justice to the improbable story of God. Christian culture making grows through networks, but it is not a matter of networking. It is a matter of community—a relatively small group of

people whose common life is ordered by love. Love is a fragile thing that does not scale well. It seems small beside the towers of Babel and Babylon. It is like a mustard seed, tiny and seemingly vulnerable. But it is the unseen truth of the universe, the key to the whole story.

Mercifully, very few of us will be given the gift and the cross of fame—access to and responsibility for circles of 3, 12, and 120 that touch the largest scales of cul-

ture. Those who are given that vocation will only survive it to the extent that they are surrounded by a robust community of fearless friends. And it is such communities, not just their famous representatives, that can actually transform culture. Communities are the way God intervenes to offer, within every culture, a different and better horizon. To be Christian is to stake our lives on this belief: the only cultural goods that ultimately matter are the ones that love creates. **C**

**Andy Crouch** is author of *Culture Making: Recovering Our Creative Calling*. Learn more at [www.culture-making.com](http://www.culture-making.com).

1. Journal some thoughts about the fact that most of the culture that you encounter, consume, and enjoy originates with such small groups of people.

2. How is it relevant that the 3 : 12 : 120 exists throughout Scripture? Can you apply this relevance in your ministry? How?

3. Andy poses some great questions. After you define who your three are, answer the following:

- Who are the few people you trust enough to risk creating something together?
- What is the cultural sphere and scale where you could imagine successfully proposing a cultural good?
- Who might be members of your twelve?
- Who might be drawn into the circle of the 120 who will eventually lend their effort and energy to moving the horizons of possibility with you?

4. The idea that “Christian culture making grows through networks, but it is not a matter of networking,” counters popular (Christian) thinking. We, at times, are shameless networkers. Discuss Andy’s assertion that community differs from network in that it is ordered by love.