A POCKET GUIDE TO

CHRISTIANITY AND CULTURE

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The former Soviet Union is the first place that caused me to grapple with the profoundly cultural nature of the Christian life. The year was 1998. I was in my early twenties and had moved to Kazan, Russia, for two years to teach at several universities and to share the gospel as often as possible.

I was immersed in a cultural context that was a mixture of Eastern European and Central Asian, and which had been shaped in various ways in the past by Sunni Islam and Soviet communism, and more recently by global capitalism and postmodernism. These religious and ideological influences shaped everything in the culture, including the arts, sciences, politics, economic, education, entertainment, family life, and even sports competitions. I was forced to think carefully about what it meant for me to live a faithfully Christian life in that particular context.

In the years that followed, I taught or ministered in a number of other contexts. In the United Arab Emirates, I encountered an extremely wealthy Arab society underpinned not only by Sunni Islam but by advanced capitalism. In Indonesia, I experienced a Southeast Asian society characterized by its unique combination of animism and Sunni Islam. In China, I spent time with citizens who were part of one of the most ancient cultures in the world, mesmerizing in its complexity, and influenced by Confucianism, Buddhism, Marxism, and Christianity. Arriving in India, I found myself in the midst of a society whose culture was every bit as complex as China's, and even more religiously diverse, as it is the home to millions of Hindus, Sikhs, Muslims, and Christians.

Each of these countries had its own fascinating combination of cultures and sub-cultures. Each had its own forms of art and architecture, scholarship and education, politics and economics, business and entrepreneurship. Each had its own music, its own

culinary traditions, its own family and community traditions. Each was a mixed bag of "good" and "bad," as each society produces culture in ways that are warped and distorted by sin and idolatry. Most importantly of all, each cultural context was ripe for Christian ministry and mission. Every single society and culture—bar none—holds forth the potential to receive Jesus Christ and his gospel, and to be transformed by him.

That is good news, because Jesus' parting words formed an imperative for his followers to make disciples everywhere they went, to all of the nations, even to the ends of the earth! In Matthew's Gospel, we are told that Jesus said, "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:19-20, NKJV). Even though thousands of years have passed, Christians today have that same mission, a mission that is necessarily accomplished at the intersection of gospel, church, and culture.

While the evangelical church has given substantial theological treatments of *gospel* and *church*, it has not given equal theological treatment of the concept of *culture*.[1] This oversight is unfortunate, because what you believe about culture and how well you understand your cultural context will affect the way you commu-

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[1] Evangelical missiologists have devoted much attention to culture, as evidenced by scores of books on anthropology for missionaries, cross-cultural communication, and contextualization. In recent years, there has been an increase in the number of evangelical books and articles that give theologies of culture. For a treatment of the biblical narrative and Christian worldview in relation to culture-making and cultural engagement, see Albert M. Wolters, *Creation Regained*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005) and Michael W. Goheen and Craig G. Bartholomew, *Living at the Crossroads* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008). For an exposition of the Christian's call to make culture, see Andy Crouch, *Culture Making* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2008). For an exposition of the way in which culture shapes us, see James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009). The classic text on Christianity and Culture is H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (Harper & Row, 1951).

nicate the gospel and live out your Christian faith.

One's theology of culture is the difference between genuine gospel mission and cultural imperialism. Culture is not only an academic matter but also a practical one—what you believe about culture will shape everything you do. In academic circles, questions tend to center on how to define culture and how to analyze it. In the church and on the mission field, questions often involve how to communicate the gospel across cultures, how the church expresses itself in culture, and what posture Christians have towards their surrounding culture. We need pastors and missionaries (and laity) that can do both well.

This book provides you with a theological introduction to the most foundational issues at the intersection of mission and culture. It begins by providing a basic definition of culture and then proceeds to outline a concise biblical theology of culture constructed from within the Bible's narrative of creation, fall, redemption, and restoration. Next, it will show the way in which the gospel is always lived, preached, and obeyed from within a cultural context (contextualization). Finally, it will address the way in which God and his gospel shape the way we make culture and engage the various dimensions of culture (cultural mandate).

> CHRISTIANS TODAY HAVE A MISSION THAT IS NECESSARILY ACCOMPLISHED AT THE INTERSECTION OF GOSPEL, CHURCH, AND CULTURE.

If you would like to delve deeper into these questions, I have written several other books related to the subject of this chapter:

Every Square Inch (Lexham) provides an introduction to cultural engagement, including chapters on how a Christian should

approach art, science, education, politics, and the economy.

One Nation Under God (B&H) introduces the reader to the relationship between Christianity, politics, and public life, and then guides the reader through some important issues such as abortion, same-sex marriage, race relations, immigration, war, the environment, and the economy.

Theology and Practice of Mission (B&H) addresses culture in relation to missions and church planting. In fact, the little book you are reading now is the seed content of *Theology and Practice of Mission*, which is lengthier.

As you are digging deeper, you will also find it helpful to browse through the resources available on *IntersectProject.org*.[2]

WHAT IS CULTURE?

What do we mean when we talk about *culture*? Paul Hiebert, an evangelical anthropologist and missiologist, provides a helpful working definition. For Hiebert, culture is "the more or less integrated systems of ideas, feelings, and values and their associated patterns of behavior and products shared by a group of people who organize and regulate what they think, feel, and do."[3] This definition is perhaps the most oft-quoted and used conception of culture in evangelical missiology, and is as good as any to give us a handle on the concept, from the stance of the social sciences.

Niebuhr was not an evangelical. His text describes a variety of approaches Christians have taken regarding the relationship of Christianity and culture.

[2] Bruce Riley Ashford, *Every Square Inch: An Introduction to Cultural Engagement* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2015); Bruce Ashford and Chris Pappalardo, *One Nation under God: A Christian Hope for American Politics* (Nashville: B&H, 2015); Bruce Riley Ashford, *Theology and Practice of Mission: God, the Church, and the Nations* (Nashville: B&H, 2011).

[3] Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), 30. Hiebert makes clear that neither functionalism nor symbolic anthropology can be imported wholesale. Both paradigms arose from within frameworks of thought not entirely consonant with the Christian faith.

Hiebert's work provides a social science model that is informed by, and complements, the biblical doctrines of creation and man. These doctrines reveal man as one who both produces and is shaped by culture. In fact, a very basic theological definition of culture is "that which results when God's image-bearers interact with the created order." Theologian Kevin Vanhoozer argues that culture is both a "work" and a "world" of meaning. He writes that culture "is a work because it is the result of what humans do freely, not as a result of what they do by nature," and that it is a world because "cultural texts create a meaningful environment in which humans dwell both physically and imaginatively."[4] The concept of culture, therefore, is inextricably bound up with the doctrine of man. Man produces culture and then, in turn, is shaped by the very culture he helped to produce.

For this reason we must go to the Christian Scriptures in general, and to the doctrine of man in particular, to get a handle on the notion of culture. Christian theology alone reveals man's nature as an image-bearer of the Triune God. It alone can help us understand man's works and his world. Christian theology, therefore, will provide the starting point, trajectory, and parameters for our discussion of culture. Let's now turn to the Scriptures to develop a basic theological framework for understanding culture.

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4 Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "What is Everyday Theology? How and Why Christians Should Read Culture," in Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Charles A. Anderson, Michael J. Sleasman, eds., *Everyday Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 26.

CHAPTER 1

THE BIBLICAL NARRATIVE

BUILDING A THEOLOGY OF CULTURE

Have you ever been late to the movie theater? It's very difficult to figure out the storyline of a movie if you miss the beginning. "Who is that character? Why is that character so sad? Why is that storm trooper helping Han Solo?"

Likewise, it is very difficult to determine the meaning of a film if you leave the movie theater early. What if you left the movie theater before the end of the film *Avatar*? Do the blue creatures preserve their planet and way of life? Does evil triumph over good?

The reason it would be difficult to determine a movie's meaning without watching the whole story is that meaning is discerned by paying attention to the whole context. If we want to understand a story, we need to know its beginning, middle, and end. You can't understand the point of a story if you're missing the beginning, middle or end. And the biblical storyline, the story that puts every other story in ultimate context, is no different.

The Bible's narrative is in fact the true story of the whole world, and it can be told in four acts: Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Restoration.[5] Each act is significant; indeed, if we want to think well about Christianity and culture, we must think about all of them at once when treating the subject. This narrative enables us to understand the notion of culture, this "more or less integrated systems of ideas, feelings, and values and their associated patterns of behavior and products shared by a group of people who

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[5] For a fuller treatment of the narrative, see Bruce Riley Ashford, *Theology and Practice of Mission: God, the Church, and the Nations* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2011), 6-16. Permission has been granted to use and build on portions of "The Story of Mission: The Grand Biblical Narrative" in this chapter.

organize and regulate what they think, feel, and do," to which we earlier referred.

CREATION AND FALL

The Bible's opening salvo tells us about God's creation, including God's design for human culture. In the very first chapters, we are told that God created the heavens and the earth. He created out of nothing, shaped what he created, and called the work of his hands "good." At each step along the way, the narrative affirms the goodness of God's handiwork. When he completes his creation by making humanity in his image and likeness, God calls his creation "very good."

Humans are the culmination of God's good creation. They are different from God's other handiwork; the first statement about humans is that God made them in the image and likeness of God, male and female. They are like God in many ways, including but not limited to their capacities for spirituality, morality, relationality, language, rationality, and creativity.[6] Man's likeness to God, Calvin argues, "extends to the whole excellence by which man's nature towers over all the kinds of living creatures."[7] Because of these capacities, God could place the man and woman in the garden to have dominion over God's good creation (Gen. 1:26-27) and to work it and keep it (Gen. 2:15).

After having created man, God commanded him to "work" the garden, and in so doing to participate with God in his ongoing work of creation and providence. Man is to work the garden, change it, and even enhance it. But this command was not simply about agriculture. It was about all types of culture. Man "works

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[6] Wayne Grudem provides a helpful treatment of the *imago Dei*, along the lines of the position taken in this chapter. Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 442 ff.

[7] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion 1*, ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 188.

the garden" not only by cultivating plant life, but also by cultivating the arts, the sciences, or the public square. When man obeys this command to responsibly cultivate the earth, he is pleasing God. Work is not a product of the fall.

What, then, does the creation narrative teach us about culture?

First, human culture is part of the physical and material world, which is part of God's creation and therefore is not inherently bad. We must not allow ourselves to fall into a form of neo-Gnosticism, treating "spiritual" things as good and "material" things as bad.

Albert Wolters explained the error of neo-Gnosticism in this way: God does not make junk, and we dishonor the Creator if we take a negative view of the work of his hands when he himself takes such a positive view. In fact, so positive a view did he take of what he had created that he refused to scrap it when mankind spoiled it, but determined instead, at the cost of his Son's life, to make it new and good again. God does not make junk, and he does not junk what he has made.[8]

Therefore, we may not assume that only "spiritual" things (such as prayer and meditation) are inherently good, while "material" things (including the products of human culture) are inherently bad. To do so is to mis-draw the line. We must draw a line between God and his creation, not between the material and spiritual aspects of his creation.[9] That is a false dichotomy.

Paul emphasized this distinction in Colossians 2:8 when he rebuked those who said, "Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!" (Col. 2:21, NASB). His readers were tempted to distinguish between the material and spiritual, but such a (metaphysically dualist) philosophy is hollow and deceptive. In like manner, John's first chapter makes clear that our Lord took on human flesh, which is part of God's good creation and, therefore, is not inherently bad.

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[8] Albert M. Wolters, *Creation Regained*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 48-9.

[9] This was Irenaeus' point in *Against Heresies*, when he used Romans 1 to defeat the "pernicious doctrines" of the Gnostics. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 1.22.1.

Even the fall could not make God's creation ontologically bad, or bad in its very essence. Though God's creation is affected by the fall, and though humans sometimes wrongly love God's creation more than they love the Creator himself, his creation remains good precisely because it is his creation.[10] Christians may not take a metaphysically dualist view of the creation, with its accompanying impulse toward cultural separation and withdrawal. To do so is to adopt a hollow and deceptive philosophy, to denigrate God's good creation, and implicitly to undermine the incarnation.

Second, the creation narrative reveals that God gave humans the capacity to create culture and commanded them to use those capacities to their potential. God created humans in his image and likeness, thereby giving them capacities for, as we've already seen, spirituality, morality, relationality, language, rationality, and creativity: "We are able to produce works and worlds of meaning because we are created in the image of God," Vanhoozer explains.[11]

However, God has not only given us the capacity to make culture. He has *commanded* us to use those capacities to their fullest potential. Genesis 1:28 gives Adam and Eve their basic task which involved both producing ("work the garden") and reproducing ("multiply"). This command is often called the cultural mandate because it calls man and woman to bring their influence to bear in every dimension of society and culture. Creation is what God made, but culture is what humans make out of God's good creation. When man rules, fills, works, and keeps, he is shaping culture. Plantinga writes, "There's so much to do in the world—so

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[10] Contemporary Christian dualists point to passages such as Colossians 3:2 which instruct us to set our minds on "the things above" rather than on "earthly things." But such passages do not speak against what we are arguing here. In Colossians, Paul begins by protecting the goodness of creation and only after doing so does he explain that there are earthly things that are "bad." The badness to which he is referring is moral, not ontological, badness.

[11] Vanhoozer, "What is Everday Theology?," 43.

much caretaking and earth keeping, so much filling and multiplying, so much culture to create."[12] God has given us responsible dominion over his creation, and this dominion includes culture shaping.[13]

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God's creation of the world is the opening scene of the Scriptures and constitutes the first major plot movement of the overarching biblical narrative. However, immediately after this opening scene, Adam and Eve rebelled against God, seeking to set themselves up as autonomous. The effect of this sin was disastrous for them and for all of humanity. Humanity no longer lives in paradise, but instead lives in a world pervaded with sin and its effects. The fall "was not just an isolated act of disobedience but an event of catastrophic significance for creation as a whole."[14] It broke all four of humanity's key relationships: man's relationship with God, with himself, with others, and with the rest of the created order.

In Romans 1, Paul describes the result of humanity's broken relationship with God, pointing out that humans now worship the creature rather than the Creator. The image of God in man is now distorted and defaced. However, not only is man alienated from God, he is alienated from others. Rather than loving his neighbors as himself, he lies, murders, rapes, and otherwise demeans his fellow image-bearers. Further, he is alienated from the *created order*, as his attempts to "work the garden" are full of frustration and pain. Finally, he is alienated even from *himself*, as life becomes meaningless because of his separation from God.

The fall had massive implications for human culture. Sin twists and distorts every square inch of the fabric of society and cul-

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[12] Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., *Engaging God's World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 29.

[13] For further reflection upon the doctrine of creation in relation to the cultural mandate, see Wolters, *Creation Regained*, 13-5.

[14] Wolters, Creation Regained, 53.

ture. God had intended for Adam and Eve to multiply worshipers across the face of the earth, worshipers who would make culture in a way that pleases God. And yet, after the Fall, Adam and Eve now multiplied false worshipers across the face of the earth, sinners whose culture-making and cultural lives would be degraded and defiled by sin. Spiritually, humans are idolaters, worshiping God's gifts instead of worshiping God himself. Rationally, they have difficulty discerning the truth and use their capacities to construct vain philosophies. Creatively, they use their imagination to create and worship idols rather than to worship the living God. Relationally, they use their power to exploit others and serve themselves. As a result, any and all human culture is distorted and defaced by sin. No dimension of culture is left untouched.

The fall and its consequences do not, however, make God's creation (or, by implication, human culture) inherently bad. Even though the world is corrupted by sin, it is still materially good. Recognizing this frees us from false asceticisms and gnosticisms that view the use and enjoyment of God's creation as wrong. For this reason, we must distinguish between the ontological and moral aspects of God's creation.

God's creation remains structurally good, although since the fall it is directionally corrupt, as Wolters points out. Structure refers to the order of creation, while direction refers to the order of sin and redemption: "Anything in creation can be directed either toward or away from God," he writes. "This double direction applies not only to individual human beings but also to such cultural phenomena as technology, art, and scholarship, to such societal institutions as labor unions, schools, and corporations, and to such human functions as emotionality, sexuality, and rationality."[15] The directional results of the fall, for human culture, are

[15] Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., *Engaging God's World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 29.

revealed in such things as poor reasoning in the realm of science, kitsch in the realm of art, and human hatred in the realm of relationships. Anything in creation can be directed toward God or away from him. It is this direction that distinguishes between the good and the bad, rather than some distinction between spiritual and material.

In spite of the fall, things are not as bad as they could be. Without common grace and the Spirit's restraining work, this world would be an utter horror. C. R. Vaughn paints a picture for us: "He exerts that grand restraining influence without which there can be no such things as home, society, government, civilization, or individual enjoyment anywhere among all the millions of the sinning human race. He restrains both the sinful acts and the natural tendencies of the acts within some tolerable bounds."[16] One facet of the Spirit's restraining work is the common graces he bestows upon humanity, enabling his image bearers to use their God-given capacities within the created order. Plantinga writes, "The Holy Spirit preserves much of the original goodness of creation and also inspires new forms of goodness—and not only in those people the Spirit has regenerated...The Spirit also distributes 'common grace,' an array of God's gifts that preserves and enhances human life even when not regenerating it."[17] Because of God's grace through his Spirit after the fall, we may continue to produce culture, thereby utilizing our uniquely human capacities.

REDEMPTION AND RESTORATION

The Bible's third plot movement occurs immediately after the fall. God gives not only a promise of death (Gen. 2:17), but also a promise of life (Gen. 3:15). He immediately declares that one day the offspring of the woman would destroy the serpent. Paul recog-

[16] C. R. Vaughn, *The Gifts of the Holy Spirit* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1994), 32-33.

[17] Plantinga, *Engaging God's World*, 58.

nizes this promise as a prophecy of Jesus Christ (Gal. 3:16), God's Son who is "born of a woman" (Gal. 4:4). This declaration, therefore, is God's promise to send the Messiah to whom the entirety of Scripture ultimately testifies as it declares how God, in spite of seemingly insurmountable obstacles, would fulfill his promise to send this Savior.

God affirms that by the Savior's stripes man is healed, and upon the Savior's shoulders the sin of the world was borne (Is. 52:13-53:12). Further, the redemption he provides reaches into every square inch of God's creation, including the non-human aspects of creation.

In John's gospel, we read that "God so loved the *world*, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." (John 3:16-17, ESV, emphasis added). Although some theologians have taken this inclusive language to imply some sort of pluralism or universalism, such a reading would contradict other biblical teaching (e.g. Acts 4:12). How, then, might we understand God's promise to save the world? In this case, three other biblical teachings help us better understand the universality of the Bible's *world* language.

First, Scripture makes clear that God will save for himself worshipers from among *every* tribe, tongue, people, and nation. In the glorious vision of Revelation 5, all of heaven breaks forth into song, proclaiming the Savior's worthiness to redeem. They sing, "*You are worthy to take the scroll, and to open its seals; for You were slain, and have redeemed us to God by Your blood, out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation...*" (Rev. 5:9, NKJV, *emphasis added*). The inclusivity of God's salvation through

Christ is found in his redemption of every type of person he created. He is no tribal deity, and his salvation is not limited to a few select peoples or nations. In elevated terms, the Scriptures proclaim that his Word is so profoundly true, his character so comprehensively good, his countenance so majestically beautiful, that he will find worshippers among every type of person on the face of the earth that he created.[18]

Second, Scripture makes clear that God's redemption extends beyond humanity to include a restored heavens and earth. Hence, we use the categories "redemption" and "restoration." Jesus has redeemed his creation by paying the death penalty for sin, and one day in the future will restore what he has redeemed. So, restoration is the completion of his redemption.

At the beginning of the Bible, we learn that God created the heavens and the earth (Gen. 1:1) while at the end we see him giving us a "new heavens and a new earth" (Is. 65:17; Rev. 21:1). The redemptive work of Christ extends through God's people to God's cosmos, so that in the end "creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God" (Rom. 8:21, ESV). This world will be one "in which righteousness dwells" (2 Pet. 3:13, ESV), thus fulfilling God's good purposes for his world.[19]

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[18] The best concise exposition of this aspect of eschatology is John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad*, 2d ed., rev. and exp. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 155-200.

[19] Although theologians most often reference the passages in Isaiah, Romans, 2 Peter, and Revelation, John's gospel is also significant for treating the renewal of God's creation. Andreas Köstenberger argues that John's gospel can be seen as espousing a 'new creation' theology that present's Jesus incarnation and mission in light of the renewal of creation. He writes, 'This is most apparent in the introduction to the gospel, which casts the Word's coming into the world in terms reminiscent of creation, most notably by way of references to "life" and "light," both of which constitute creation terminology. Also, John's presentation of Jesus' early ministry as encompassing a week in keeping with the week of creation is suggestive of a new creation.' Andreas Köstenberger, A Theology of John's Gospel and Letters (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 337. For further reflection on the new earth and its implications, see Russell D. Moore, "Personal and Cosmic Eschatology," in A Theology for the Church, ed. Daniel L. Akin (Nashville: B&H, 2007), 912-16; Grudem, Systematic Theology, 1158-67.

Third, the salvation that God provides will restore man at all levels of his being. God will restore not only man's relationship with God, but also man's relationships with others, with the created order, and even with himself. During the present age, the process of sanctification, which reverses alienation and restores man's relationships, is incomplete. However, the day will come when our Lord returns and establishes a new heaven and earth on which we will dwell in unbroken fellowship with him and the entire created order. In that day, there will be sin no more, tears no more, pain no more.[20]

Therefore, the final two plot movements tell the story of God redeeming both his image bearers and the rest of his creation.

Two cultural implications are important to notice.

First, the doctrines of redemption and restoration (like the doctrine of creation) affirm the *goodness of God's creation*. God values his creation and in the end times he will not reject it. There really will be no such thing as the end of this world. God will renew the heavens and earth so that they give him glory. Further, he promises to give us glorified bodies in that day. While God could have promised man an eternity floating around in a bodiless state, in some sort of ethereal wonderland, instead he promises to give man a resurrected bodily existence in a restored universe that shines with the glory of God himself. This promise is yet more reason to view God's creation as good, and our cultural interaction with it as something that pleases God.

Second, the doctrine of restoration (like the doctrine of creation) reaffirms the cultural mandate. It reaffirms the very cultural realities that we now engage in, realities such as art, architecture, and song. In other words, God's intention all along was for humanity to be profoundly and thoroughly cultural.

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[20] Moore, "Personal and Cosmic Eschatology," 912-16.

Because God (in the beginning) values his good creation and commands man to produce culture, and because he promises (in the end) to give us a glorious creation replete with its own culture, we ought to live culturally in a manner consistent with God's designs. "The difference between the Christian hope of resurrection and a mythological hope," writes Bonhoeffer, "is that the Christian hope sends a man back to his life on earth in a wholly new way."[21] This new way includes glorifying God from within our cultural contexts, providing a sign of the already-and-not-yet kingdom, of what the world will be like one day when all of creation and culture praises him. As we interact within various dimensions of culture—the arts, the sciences, education, public square, etc.—we are called to do so by bringing the gospel to bear upon those dimensions.[22]

In our evangelism and church planting, we must recognize that the gospel is always proclaimed, the church is always planted, and the Christian life is always lived within a cultural context (through human language, oratory, music, categories of thought, etc.). Instead of chafing against this reality, we may delight in our charge to make the gospel at home in those cultures, and to allow the gospel to critique them and bring them under the scrutiny of God's revelation. "We await the return of Jesus Christ," writes D. A. Carson, "the arrival of the new heaven and the new earth, the dawning of the resurrection, the glory of perfection, the beauty of holiness. Until that day, we are a people in tension. On the one hand, we belong to the broader culture in which we find ourselves;

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[21] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. Eberhard Bethge, trans. Reginald Fuller and others, rev. ed. (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1967), 176.

[22] Howard Peskett gives a helpful treatment of Revelation 21 and 22, pointing out the embodied nature of our future existence in a new heavens and new earth, and some of the implications for the church's mission today. See Howard Peskett and Vinoth Ramachandra, *The Message of Mission: The Glory of Christ in All Time and Space* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2003), 261-275.

on the other, we belong to the culture of the consummated kingdom of God, which has dawned upon us."[23] God restores his creation instead of trashing it, and he expects us to minister within our cultural context rather than attempting to extract ourselves from it.

God has revealed to us the beginning, middle, and end of creation's story, and our great hope and joy is that the best days are yet to come.

[23] Carson, *Christ & Culture Revisited*, 64.

CHAPTER 2

CONTEXTUALIZATION

MINISTERING FROM WITHIN A CULTURAL CONTEXT

Have you ever tried to communicate with someone who doesn't speak your language? It can be frustrating if you are the one trying to communicate, and yet find yourself unable to get your point across. But it can be humorous, and even borderline hysterical, to watch somebody else struggle with the same challenge.

Consider the example of an American trying to communicate directions to a foreign visitor who can understand very little English. The well-intentioned American is frustrated, wanting to assist the visitor, but unable to get the visitor to understand the directions. Invariably, the American intuitively thinks the visitor will be able to understand better if he increases the volume of the communication, so he says "Ma'am, the *GROCERY STORE IS THREE BLOCKS DOWN*, ***THEN TWO BLOCKS TO THE LEFT!!!***" In the midst of our perfervid attempt to communicate, we lose sight of the fact that the other person heard us just fine the first time. The problem isn't volume but comprehension.

I use this example because communication is a significant part of the thing that we will examine in this chapter—contextualization. Each of us must properly contextualize the gospel; we must situate the gospel appropriately in a particular cultural context. And a large part of contextualization is communication. In order for us to faithfully carry a message from person to person, we must overcome every cultural barrier, language being one among many. Not only that, we must receive the message from another culture, the original context of the gospel, and comprehend it in

our own cultural context.

So now, let's examine together how we can proclaim and embody the gospel *in the midst of human cultures*. This process, often referred to as "contextualization," is one of the most hotly debated in the theological world.[24] As Hiebert points out, "On the one hand, the gospel belongs to no culture. It is God's revelation of himself and his acts to all people. On the other hand, it must always be understood and expressed within human cultural forms."[25] In this brief section, we will discover that Scripture provides us examples of contextualization, that contextualization is inevitable, and that in order to contextualize well, we must proclaim and embody the gospel in ways that are faithful, meaningful, and dialogical.

CONTEXTUALIZATION AND THE GOSPEL

The New Testament provides abundant examples of theology conceptualized and communicated contextually. The four Gospel writers shaped their material for engaging particular communities of readers. In addition, Paul shaped his sermons and speeches according to each particular context. An examination of his sermons in Acts 13 (to a Jewish Diaspora), Acts 14 (to a crowd of rural animists), Acts 17 (to the cultural elite of the Areopagus), and his testimonies in Acts 22 (to a mob of Jewish patriots) and Acts 26 (to the elite of Syria-Palestine) reveals Paul's deft ability

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[24] The word "contextualization" first appeared in 1972 in *Ministry in Context*, a publication of the Theological Education Fund. Dean Gilliland points out that their concern was that "both the approach and content of theological reflection tend to move within the framework of Western questions and cultural presuppositions, failing to vigorously address the gospel of Jesus Christ to the particular situation." This text described contextualization as "the capacity to respond meaningfully to the gospel within the framework of one's own situation. Dean Gilliland, "Contextualization," in *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions*, ed. A. Scott Moreau (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 225.

[25] Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights*, 30.

to communicate the gospel *faithfully*, *meaningfully*, and *dialogically* in a variety of settings.

In Acts 17, for example, Paul preaches to the cultural elite on Mars Hill. In so doing, he was first and foremost *faithful* to God's revelation. He spoke of God's creation of the world, God's sovereignty and providence over his world, and finally God's judgment through Christ Jesus who was resurrected from the dead. The core of his message remained unchanged.

Second, Paul spoke in a manner that was *meaningful* to his audience's socio-cultural and situational context. He referenced the altar to the unknown god, quoted the pagan intellectuals Aratus and Epimenides the Cretan (v.28), and referenced multiple Stoic and Epicurean convictions.[26] As Eckhard Schnabel has pointed out, Paul established meaningful "points of contact" to share his message -- including his description of God (vv.22-23, 24-28), critique of man-made temples (v.24), critique of sacrifices (v.25), humanity's search for God (vv.27-28), and critique of idol images (v.29).[27]

But finally, Paul also communicated in a *dialogical* manner. Although he began with points of contact, he did not end there. Over and again, Paul corrected pagan idolatry by showing how the Scriptures subvert and overthrow pagan idolatry as manifested in their literature, philosophy, and theology. Schnabel references nine clear points at which Paul contradicted the pagans in his Mars Hill Sermon.[28] Although Paul began by using some categories familiar to the Athenians and answering some questions they likely would have raised, he followed through by also introducing them to biblical categories and answering questions that they had not raised.

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[26] F. F. Bruce, Paul: *Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 242.

[27] Eckhard Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2008), 171.

[28] Ibid., 174-183.

The call to contextualize the gospel is not limited to dramatic scenarios such as the one portrayed in Acts 17. Just as the four Gospel writers shaped their books for engaging particular communities of readers, and just as Paul fashioned each of his sermons and speeches according to a particular context, so we communicate the gospel contextually.

The *gospel is always expressed in cultural forms* and cannot be otherwise.

Vanhoozer puts it this way: "Disciples do not follow the gospel in a vacuum but wend their Christian way through particular times and places, each with its own problems and possibilities."[29] In other words, contextualization is not just for missionaries. We all do it.

Indeed, one Central Asian mission leader explains that "American Christians have a tendency to think of contextualization as something missionaries and overseas Christians do 'over there,' and many serious Christians in the Western world worry about how far non-Western churches go in their contextualization efforts. However, in reality, every Christian alive today is actively involved in contextualization. Every American Christian worships in a contextualized church."[30] Christianity is and always has been believed and practiced contextually.

Indeed, every church contextualizes by the type of building and décor it chooses and the style of music it plays. Every preacher contextualizes by choosing, for example, a form of rhetoric, a way of relating to others, and a manner of clothing. The mission leader continues, "The question is not whether or not we are going to do it. The question facing every believer and every church

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[29] Vanhoozer, "What is Everyday Theology?,"16.

[30] Central Asia mission leader, "Biblical Foundations and Guidelines for Contextualization (Pt. 1)," *http://betweenthetimes.com/2008/08/28/guest-blog-by-central-asia-rl-biblical-foundations-and-guidelines-for-contextualization-pt-1/.*

is whether or not they will contextualize well. Anyone who fails to realize that they are doing it, and who fails to think it through carefully and Biblically, simply guarantees that they will probably contextualize poorly. Syncretism can happen as easily in Indiana or Iowa as it can in Indonesia!"[31] The question is not whether we will contextualize; the question is whether we do it appropriately or not. In order to proclaim the gospel and plant churches in an appropriately contextual manner, we must follow Paul's example by proclaiming and planting in three ways: faithfully, meaningfully, and dialogically.

FAITHFULLY

We must pay careful attention to our beliefs and practices, ensuring that we express and embody the gospel in cultural forms that are faithful to the Scriptures. In being faithful to the Scriptures, we seek to interpret the Scriptures accurately before proclaiming them within a cultural context. Of course, some scholars view texts as vast oceans of unclear symbols that lack transcendent grounding. And we acknowledge that readers come to a text through finite and fallible interpretive frameworks. Yet, we nonetheless believe that faithful interpretation is possible.

> THE GOSPEL IS ALWAYS EXPRESSED IN CULTURAL FORMS AND CANNOT BE OTHERWISE.

The triune God enables faithful communication, and indeed is the paradigm of all message-sending and receiving. The Trinitarian God's communicative action provides a general hermeneutic for us. The triune God is Father (the One who speaks), Son (the Word), and Spirit (the one who illumines and guides and teaches);

[31] Ibid.

God the Father speaks through his Son, and we as humans are enabled to hear and understand that communication by his Spirit. Vanhoozer writes, "The Trinity thus serves the role of what Kant calls a 'transcendental condition': a necessary condition for the possibility of something humans experience but cannot otherwise explain, namely, the experience of meaningful communication."[32] The Trinity demonstrates to us that accomplished communication is possible.

Faithful interpretation is driven by the quest to discern the author's intent. H. L. Hix puts it well: "Any theory of interpretation that misunderstands what an author is cannot hope to understand what a text is and how it conveys…meaning."[33] We discern the meaning of a biblical passage by reading it in light of its intentional context; in other words, we read it against the backdrop of that which best enables us to answer the question of what the author is doing. We read a passage in John's gospel, for example, by reading it in light of John's entire book, which provides the intentional context for the human author. Moreover, we read the same passage in light of the entire canon of Scripture, which provides the intentional context for the Divine Author. Vanhoozer writes, "If we are reading the Bible as the Word of God, therefore, I suggest that the context that yields this maximal sense is the canon, taken as a unified communicative act."[34] In order to interpret a biblical

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[32] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 456. Vanhoozer gives a comprehensive and persuasive argument for a Trinitarian hermeneutic. He builds upon ordinary language theory and provides a theological treatment of related philosophical issues such as realism and rationality. For reflection on how the doctrines of God and Revelation undergird the process of cross-cultural communication and interpretation, see David J. Hesselgrave, *Paradigms in Conflict* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2005), 243-77. For a comprehensive Christian exposition of cross-cultural communication, see David J. Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally*, 2 ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991).

[33] H. L. Hix, *Morte D'Author* (Philadelphia: Temple University, 1990), 12.

[34] Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning?*, 265.

passage faithfully, therefore, we must strive to understand both its immediate and broader intentional contexts.

MEANINGFULLY

We must proclaim and embody the gospel *in a way that is meaningful for the cultural context*. James McClendon writes, "If hearers were (minimally) to understand the gospel, if there was to be uptake, the preacher must understand the culture addressed."[35] Indeed, we want the hearer to understand the words we speak and the actions we perform in the way that we intend, and we want them to be able to respond in a way that is meaningful in context. This type of proclamation takes hard work; learning a culture is more complex than learning a language because language is only one component of culture. Pastors and professors must work hard to teach their audiences not only how to read the Bible, but also how to read the culture.[36]

As we argue in the next section, cultural insiders will take the lead in determining how to communicate the gospel in their sociocultural matrix. This communication is premised upon the inherent "translatability" of the Christian Scriptures. Because of the Bible's inherent translatability, Lamin Sanneh speaks of contextualization as "vernacular translation" and Christianity as a "vernacular translation movement."[37] Unlike Islam, which affirms Arabic as the only suitable language for Allah's words, Christianity expands as the Scriptures are translated into the vernacular, the speech of common people. Sanneh, Andrew Walls, Kwame Bediako, and others have demonstrated that no one sociocultural or linguistic matrix

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[35] James Wm. McClendon,Jr., *Witness* (vol. 1 of *Systematic Theology*; ed. James Wm. McClendon, Jr.; Nashville: Abingdon, 2000), 40.

[36] For further reflection on reading cultures, see Vanhoozer, Anderson, and Sleazman, *Everyday Theology*; for a discussion on how to read the worldviews underlying culture, see Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally*, 193-285.

[37] Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2005).

has a corner on the universal or exclusive norm for Christian faith or theology. The Christian Scriptures may be proclaimed and embodied meaningfully from within any socio-cultural and linguistic context.[38]

DIALOGICALLY

Finally, we must also allow the gospel to critique the culture in which it is embodied and proclaimed. There is an ever-present danger that Christian preachers, missionaries, and communities will equate the gospel with a cultural context. This leads to devastating consequences.

In an attempt to communicate the gospel meaningfully within a culture, and in an attempt to affirm whatever in a culture can be affirmed, Christians may lose sight of the effects of sin on that culture. Therefore, we must remember that the gospel stands in judgment of all cultures, calling them to conform themselves to the image of Christ. The gospel does not condemn every part of a culture, but it always and simultaneously affirms and rejects different aspects of a culture. If the gospel we preach does not have a prophetic edge then we are not fully preaching the gospel.

In seeking to proclaim the gospel in a way that is meaningful, we listen to the questions that a culture asks, acknowledge the categories within which it thinks, and learn the language that it speaks. But at the same time, we recognize that without the gospel the host culture does not know all of the right questions to ask, does not have all of the right categories within which to think, and does not possess a fully adequate vocabulary. As Plantinga puts it, one must engage in the "very common human enterprise of diagnosis, prescription, and prognosis, but to do so from inside a Christian view of the world, a view that has been constructed from Scripture and

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[38] Andrew Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1996), 3-54; Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1995).

that centers on Jesus Christ the Savior."[39] Some theologians have called this process "dialogical" (or conversational) contextualization. David Clark writes, "Using a dialogical method implies we notice the danger in simply asking Scripture to answer the culture's concerns. A dialogical approach requires that the Bible not only answer our concerns but also transform those concerns."[40] In taking a dialogical approach the Christian who seeks to evangelize, plant churches, disciple, or pastor within a particular context will find himself in a continued dialogue with that cultural context.

Take, for example, a church planter.[41] Those seekers he converses with raise questions from within their particular cultural and sub-cultural contexts. The church planter offers initial responses from the Scriptures. As these seekers come to faith in Christ, begin to obey, and keep their hearts open to God, they also allow the Scriptures to critique the cultural viewpoint from which they raised their questions. Through Bible study and prayer, they begin to form a (contextual) theology.[42] If they are able, they discuss their theology with believers from other contexts (whether by reading historical theologians and writers, or by conversing with contemporaries who find themselves in a different cultural or subcultural context). Again and again, they return to the Scriptures, evaluating their emerging theological framework and praying that

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[39] Plantinga, *Engaging God's World*, 15.

[40] David K. Clark, *To Know and Love God* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2003), 115.

[41] This example is adapted from the seven-step model outlined in Clark, *To Know and Love God*, 114.

[42] Some "contextual" theologies are not faithful to the biblical teaching once for all delivered to the saints. The method I am proposing, however, seeks to uphold the full authority of Scripture by unleashing Scripture to speak faithfully, meaningfully, and dialogically to each individual culture. Although I have applied this model to international church planting, it is just as easily applied to work here in the United States. In fact, this type of contextualization is no different than the one employed (either well or badly) by pastors in, for example, the rural South of the United States.

God will guide them into a proper interpretation, synthesis, and application of the Scriptures for their particular culture.

Note that contextualization requires both "insider" and "outsider" critiques. Participants from within a culture need to take the lead. They have more explicit and implicit (tacit) knowledge of their culture than the cultural outsider ever will.[43] However, the cultural outsider also has the advantage of being able to see that same culture from a different vantage point. This is why Clark argues that "questions framed in the terms of non-Western cultures can help illuminate blind spots" in Western theology.[44] Christian Scripture provides a particular set of categories, poses a particular set of questions, and provides particular answers to those questions. These categories, questions, and answers should challenge the conceptual framework of all cultures. For this reason, we endeavor to read the church fathers, the reformers, and others who preached and embodied the gospel in eras different from our own, and to read and converse with Asian, African, and Latin American Christians who proclaim and embody the gospel in sociocultural contexts different from our own. These perspectives can expose our cultural blind spots.

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[43] Tacit knowledge differs from formal knowledge in that it is not codified and not easily shared. A person who learns to ride a bicycle, for example, has both formal and tacit knowledge of how to do so. His formal knowledge would include "one must pedal" and "one must balance." His tacit knowledge, however, is the learned experience of how to balance, pedal, and steer. This knowledge is not easily communicated but nonetheless very important. Cultural insiders have tacit knowledge of their culture that a cultural outsider (including a bicultural person) might never gain. Michael Polanyi brought attention to tacit knowledge within the fields of science and philosophy, but the concept is helpful also for missiology. Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1958).

[44] Clark, *To Know and Love God*, 118.

CONCLUSION

The upshot of all of this is that we need to work hard to exegete both Scripture and culture. "In order to be competent proclaimers and performers of the gospel," Vanhoozer writes, "Christians must learn to read the Bible and culture alike. Christians cannot afford to continue sleepwalking their way through contemporary culture, letting their lives, and especially their imaginations, become conformed to culturally devised myths, each of which promises more than it can deliver."[45] The Christian who ignores cultural context does so to his own detriment and to the detriment of those to whom he ministers.[46] We will not reach more people simply by speaking louder.

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[45] Vanhoozer, "What is Everyday Theology?" 35.

[46] For further reading on the dangers stemming from missionaries who contextualize poorly, see David J. Hesselgrave, "Syncretism: Mission and Missionary Induced?" in *Contextualization and Syncretism: Navigating Cultural Currents*, EMS Series #13 (Pasadena, CA: William Carey, 2006), 71-98.

CHAPTER 3

CULTURE-MAKING AND CULTURE-SHAPING

THE GOSPEL FOR ALL SPHERES OF CULTURE

It is amazing how much the invention of television has changed our lives. Its invention, and development over the years, has altered the way we arrange the interior of our homes, the things we choose to do during the day, and even the way we think about the world. For example, in the early days of television, people were very suspicious of television's value. "Why do I need a television? I have a radio, for crying out loud!" Yet soon the new visual technology triumphed such that most people not only had a television in their home, but made it the centerpiece of their family room. Not long after, color televisions were brought to market. Now we not only have color televisions, but big-screen TVs that enable us to choose what we watch and when we watch it, and to select from hundreds of thousands of options.

Can you imagine going back in time? How would you react if you turned on your television set, only to find out that the screen was black-and-white, and that it carried only one channel? Or worse, what if you had thousands of channels and content providers, but your television only allowed you to use one channel—forever? Most likely, you'd be disappointed because something designed to be large and unlimited was delivered to you in a small and very limited manner.

Maybe that provides a helpful analogy with how disappointed

we should be if we take something that God designed to be robust and comprehensive—our devotion to him—and make it into something weak and limited. But that's exactly what we are tempted to do. We are tempted to allow Jesus to have his lordship over certain areas of our lives, such as church worship and personal devotions, but forget about him when we enter the workplace, participate in leisure activities, or interact in politics and public life.

The gospel was designed to transform every sphere of God's world, yet as Christians, we tend to focus on a few spheres at a time.

In this final chapter, let's explore how we can apply God's Word to God's world—bringing Christian theology and practice to bear on all of the dimensions of human society and culture. We argued before that the doctrine of creation undergirds this discussion. Because God is the Creator and King over all that exists, Christians actively seek to demonstrate his kingship in every dimension of human culture and across the fabric of human existence. If we do not "embody our faith in the shapes of everyday life,"[47] we limit our witness. Therefore, we endeavor to proclaim and embody the gospel, and allow it to guide our thinking and acting, in every station in society and culture.

MAKING AND ENGAGING CULTURE THROUGH OUR VOCATIONS

One significant way Christians apply God's Word to God's world is through honoring him in the various situations in which we find ourselves. We apply our faith in every station of life: family, church, workplace, and community. Martin Luther spoke of this in terms of *vocatio* (calling). For him, these stations of life are not peripheral to faithful living, but central.[48]

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[47] Vanhoozer, "What is Everyday Theology?" 16

[48] A very accessible exposition and application of Luther's doctrine of vocation is Gene E. Veith, *God at Work: Your Christian Vocation in All of Life* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2002).

Luther's contention was that wherever we find ourselves, in whatever station of life, this life situation (if we are being obedient) is the one to which God has called us. You can readily see this when God calls us to a workplace. God instituted work before the fall; God takes pleasure in the work of his image-bearers. Their work is not merely for financial gain. It is also God's way of providing for his world. When God wants to feed a hungry child, usually he does not do so by sending manna from heaven. Instead, he does so through the farmer who grows the food, the trucker who transports it, the carpenter who constructs the grocery store, and the grocery clerk who shelves it. All four of these workers (farmer, trucker, carpenter, clerk) can labor either with great significance or no significance, either with an eye toward loving God and their neighbor or with no thought toward such things. Christians in the workplace share life with and work alongside of unbelievers, and their obedience to Christ in that arena is of no small significance.

> IF ALL THINGS ARE CREATED BY CHRIST, AND INDEED SUBSIST IN HIM, THEN THE MINISTRY OF THE WORD TO THE WORLD INCLUDES THE APPLICATION OF THE WORD TO ALL AREAS OF LIFE.

The same can be said for the Christian's other callings, such as his calling to a family, a church, and a community. In fact, as Gene Veith argues, these callings are "comprehensive and day-by-day, involving almost every facet of our lives, the whole texture of relationships, responsibilities, and focuses of attention that take up nearly every moment of our lives."[49] The Christian who takes seriously his callings determines not to limit his faith to the four walls of a church building but to apply it to all of life. He views

[49] Veith, *God at Work*, 133.

himself as sent by God into these various arenas, and his calling becomes part of his mission.

LIVING THE CHRISTIAN MISSION IN EVERY SPHERE OF CULTURE

Another significant application of God's Word to his world is by thinking and acting "Christianly" in the various dimensions of human society and culture, including the arts, the sciences, and the public square. If God is the Creator of man, the one who gives man the ability to create human culture, then he also has the right to be glorified in those same dimensions. No realm of creation or culture may be excluded. This is Abraham Kuyper's point when he writes, "The Son [of God] is not to be excluded from anything. You cannot point to any natural realm or star or comet or even descend into the depth of the earth, but it is related to Christ, not in some unimportant tangential way, but directly."[50] If all things are created by Christ, and indeed subsist in him, then the ministry of the Word to the world includes the application of the Word to all areas of life. "Faith seeking understanding" applies not only to the study of Scripture but also to the study of creation and human culture.

It is incumbent upon believers, first of all, to bring all of their cultural endeavors under submission to the lordship of Christ. As believers, we live in cultural contexts that are twisted and distorted by sin. Remember, behind every human culture are foundational worldviews, and behind every worldview are various religions and philosophies. The more a culture's underlying worldview-religion-philosophy amalgamation departs from a Christian worldview, the more distorted, fragmented, and adverse to the gospel that culture will be.

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[50] Abraham Kuyper, *You Can Do Greater Things Than Christ*, trans. Jan H. Boer (Jos, Nigeria: Institute of Church and Society, 1991), 74. This is the translation of a section from the first volume of Kuyper's Pro Rege, of Het Koningschap van Christus (Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1911).

Our sinful hearts overflow with disobedience, resulting in a degradation of the cultural activity for which God created us. Sin and its consequences are felt not only in individual human hearts but in art, science, education, and politics. Religion is heartfelt, therefore, it radiates outward into the totality of a person's life. Therefore, faithful Christians seek to be a redemptive influence in those same dimensions. To have such influence, we must critically engage with culture rather than passively consuming it, on the one hand, or withdrawing from it, on the other.[51]

But how can we get a handle on how to bring our cultural endeavors under submission to Christ's Lordship? Our cultural endeavors encompass pretty much the totality of our lives and they take place in spheres of culture that are twisted and distorted by sin. The task seems overwhelming.

To live out this cultural aspect of our mission, we should ask three questions every time we find ourselves in a particular sphere of culture:

1. *What is God's creational design for a particular sphere of culture?*
2. *How has this sphere of culture been corrupted and mis directed by sin?*

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[51] Sociologist James Davison Hunter has argued convincingly that cultures change from the "top" down, meaning that cultural change is often forged by the elites in the arts, sciences, education, etc. Hunter writes, "In short, when networks of elites in overlapping fields of culture and overlapping spheres of social life come together with their varied resources and act in common purpose, cultures do change and do profoundly. Persistence over time is essential; little of significance happens in three to five years. But when cultural and symbolic capital overlap with social capital and economic capital, and in time, political capital, and these various resources are directed toward shared ends, the world, indeed, changes." James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2010), 43. While a sound biblical theology of culture gives reason for Christians to do faithful and excellent work in the arts, sciences, business, education, and the public square, Hunter's sociological argument suggests that gospel influence on a culture may very well come through those who, because of their faithfulness and excellence, rise to the top of their fields.

3. How can I redirect my activities in this realm toward Christ so that my activities are in accord with God's design and are honoring to Christ?

Although these questions are easy to ask, they are not usually easy to answer. We must pray for God to empower us and give us wisdom, and we must work hard to discern how to apply God's redemptive word to the cultural realities around us.

Another way of looking at the cultural aspect of the Christian mission is to say that if God's people really want to critically engage culture, they must learn to do two practices: read and to write culture.[52] We must learn to read the culture, to understand our socio-cultural context and its attendant works of philosophy, art, science, and popular culture. But we must also learn to write culture, to create and construct works of culture within those same arenas.[53] The church should encourage her younger members to take their studies and vocations seriously, and her more established members to take their professions seriously, realizing that such things are a calling from God and hold forth potential for his glory.[54] The founders of Harvard College understood

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[52] Vanhoozer, "What is Everyday Theology?" 18.

[53] For further reading, see Andy Crouch, *Culture Making*. Crouch gives a helpful biblical theology of culture making, a theology which issues forth in a recognition of God's grace in allowing us to make culture out of his good creation: "The way to genuine cultural creativity starts with the recognition that we woke up this morning in our right mind, with the use and activity of our limbs—and that every other creative capacity we have has likewise arrived as a gift we did not earn and to which we were not entitled. And once we are awake and thankful, our most important cultural contribution will very likely come from doing whatever keeps us precisely in the center of delight and surprise." Crouch, *Culture Making*, 252.

[54] For an introductory exposition of a Christian's role in various spheres of culture, see Ashford, *Every Square Inch* and Goheen and Bartholomew, *Living at the Crossroads*. For an exposition of various culture-shapers throughout church history, see T. M. Moore, *Culture Matters*. For a theological treatment of work and leisure as part of the cultural mandate, see Leland Ryken, *Redeeming the Time: A Christian Approach to Work & Leisure* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995).

this. In a pamphlet published in 1643, they set forth their mission statement: "Let every student be plainly instructed, and earnestly pressed, to consider well [that] the maine end of his life and studies is to *know God and Jesus Christ which is eternal life*, Jn. 17:3, and therefore to lay Christ in the bottome, as the only foundation of all sound knowledge and learning."[55] The whole world is the sphere of God's sovereignty and, therefore, the whole world is the sphere of the church's activity to glorify him. In the Christian life, no room exists for cultural indifference.

CONCLUSION

God created the world in which we minister, and God gave us the capacities to minister therein. God's world is good and—although it has been corrupted—we may use any and all aspects of God's world to bring Him glory. Further, God created man and gave him the capacity to create culture. God himself inspired the Scriptures which are written in the midst of human culture, and he calls us to proclaim the gospel in the midst of such culture.

God claims sovereignty over all of his creation, and he directs his church's mission to extend across all of creation. He is the Lord over every tribe, tongue, people, and nation—over every type of person who has ever lived across the span of history and the face of the globe. And he is the Lord over every facet of human life—over the artistic, the scientific, the philosophical, the economic, and the sociopolitical. "The Earth is the LORD's and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein" (Ps. 24:1, ESV). May we take the opportunity God has given us to proclaim the gospel across the whole of human existence and in every dimension of human culture, and do so in a way that upholds his gospel, builds his church, and advances his kingdom.

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[55] "New England's First Fruits," quoted in Perry Miller and Thomas H. Johnson, *The Puritans* (New York: American Book, 1938), 702.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Theology and Practice of Mission, Bruce Riley Ashford

Every Square Inch, Bruce Riley Ashford

One Nation Under God, Bruce Riley Ashford and Chris Pappalardo

Onward, by Russell Moore

Culture Making, Andy Crouch

Joy for the World: How Christianity Lost Its Cultural Influence and Can Begin Rebuilding It, Greg Forster

Called to Holy Worldliness, Richard J. Mouw

The Weight of Glory, C.S. Lewis

True Story of the Whole World, Michael W. Goheen and Craig G. Bartholomew

Far as the Curse is Found, Michael D. Williams

Culture Matters: A Call for Consensus on Christian Cultural Engagement, T.M. Moore and Richard John Neuhaus

Engaging Unbelief: A Captivating Strategy from Augustine & Aquinas, Curtis Chang

A*braham Kuyper: A Short and Personal Introduction*, Richard J. Mouw

Surprised by Joy, C.S. Lewis

Francis Schaeffer: An Authentic Life, Colin Duriez

Every Good Endeavor: Connecting Your Work to God's Work, Timothy Keller

Work Matters: Connecting Sunday Worship to Monday Work, Tom Nelson

Work: The Meaning of Your Life, Lester DeKoster and Stephen Grabill

Art and the Bible, Francis Schaeffer

Scribbling in the Sand: Christ and Creativity, Michael Card

Art for God's Sake, Philip Graham Ryken

Redeeming Science: A God-Centered Approach, Vern S. Poythress

The Question of God: C.S. Lewis and Sigmund Freud Debate God, Love, Sex, and the Meaning of Life, Armand Nicholi

Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion, and Naturalism, Alvin Plantinga

The Soul of Science: Christian Faith and Natural Philosophy, Nancy R. Pearcey and Charles B. Thaxton

Evangelicals in the Public Square: Four Formative Voices on Political Thought and Action, J. Budziszewski

To Change the World: Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World, James Davidson Hunter

When Helping Hurts, How to Alleviate Poverty Without Hurting the Poor...and Yourself, Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert

Christians in an Age of Wealth: A Biblical Theology of Stewardship, Craig L. Blomberg

The Treasure Principle, Randy Alcorn

Engaging God's World: A Christian Vision of Faith, Learning, and Living, Cornelius Plantinga

Renewing Minds: Serving Church and Society Through Christian Higher Education, David S. Dockery

Living at the Crossroads: An Introduction to Christian Worldview, Michael W. Goheen and Craig G. Bartholomew

The Universe Next Door: A Basic Worldview Catalog, James W. Sire

The Mission of God's People: A Biblical Theology of the Church's Mission, Christopher J. H. Wright