

**Comprehending the Universal
Through Culture Specifics -
An Analysis of Interpreting the Bible in Diverse Cultures**

Dr. Edward E. Dudek

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Universal Commonality and Diversity in Cultures

While recognizing the great diversity among human societies, there are many basic human similarities and common human aspirations and values. Each culture approaches life differently, yet life is based on certain universals, such as the need for food and water, shelter, relationships with others, and social organization (2014 Moreau, 2).

Christians believe that though the Message communicated by the Cross is expressed in and constrained by human language, it is uniquely God speaking to people (2009 Hiebert, 30-31). Christians believe that when God chose to communicate Himself to humanity, He did so within the context of human language and culture, in particular historical and sociocultural contexts. For example, He revealed Himself to Abraham and spoke through the prophets in specific languages and in ways that were culturally understandable for those people. God's greatest self-revelation, the Incarnation, took place within all the particularities of a specific time and culture. (Tennent, 325)

The Ten Commandments, the Sermon on the Mount, and the fruit of the Spirit, as well as many similar statements, appear to be the supra-cultural will of God for human conduct. Kraft observes that they are phrased at a level of abstraction that largely removes them from specific application to the original societies in which they were given.

Furthermore, as one moves from specific cultural applications of supra-cultural truth (as with the head-covering command) back toward the most general statements of the truth, the statements require less understanding of the original cultural context to be accurately understood. In this way they have more immediate (though general) meaning to us in another sociocultural context. (2013 Kraft, 110).

In this article, originally a part of my doctoral research, I seek to discover and determine the supra-cultural indicators or qualities of major parts of Christian concepts of sanctification/spiritual transformation. My visit, tour and research in Israel and Greece helped seeing portions of the Bible through the eyes of people closer to Jewish and Greek culture, as well as studying that message with a Greek and Hebrew cultural understanding.

Partial Understanding of the Supra-Cultural Message

Though much of Scriptural truth is understandable even across time and cultural difference, one's understanding of Scripture is always partial and dependent on one's perspective. Like the apostle Paul, we know in part, and at present and like a child we see in a mirror of polished metal dimly, as if peering at a blurred reflection that baffles us (I Cor.13:12). But the fact that we are humans and see through a glass darkly does not mean that we do not see at all. We can read the Scriptures and understand them. The Message is clear: It is God's will for us; we can be free from the power of sin; we can live in faith and love; we can live a life pleasing to God because of what Christ has accomplished on the Cross. Of these truths a Christian believer can be certain. It is the fine details that are seen less clearly.

Problems Raised by Monocultural Interpretations

It is important to be aware of the problems raised by monocultural interpretations of Scripture and the theologies produced by those without a cross-cultural viewpoint. The same can be said concerning the perspective of a single academic discipline or of those whose involvement with Scripture is primarily a "thought involvement" rather than that of "experience." (2013 Kraft, 229)

No Scripture was a matter of the writer's own imagination or personal interpretation of truth that came from his own ideas or inspiration, but he or she rather was influenced and moved by the Holy Spirit (II Pe.1:20-21). As Bevans observes (5), the Writings were done in human contexts, written in human terms, and conditioned by human personality, styles and circumstances. At the same time, while there are no universal expressions of Biblical teachings that are free of culture, the Bible nonetheless expresses absolute and universal truths. However, since God continues to provide revelation of Himself through the Scriptures and within the human cultural context, a variety of Spirit-led human beings have applied a range of culturally, psychologically, disciplinarily, and otherwise-conditioned perceptions, and so have developed theologies of sanctification appropriate to their own insights and experiences, which can be instructive to others of similar and dissimilar backgrounds (2013 Kraft, 243-244).

Controlling Cultural Biases

Since Hiebert finds all truth perceived by humans to be partial and having a subjective element within it, he stresses the importance of seeing the church as an international hermeneutical community, in which Christians and theologians from different lands can check one another's cultural biases (1994 Hiebert, 48,98). Such community-based hermeneutics certainly could serve to correct the biases of individuals and to join the larger church community around the world in seeking to overcome the limited perspectives each brings, as well as the biases each has that might distort the Message communicated by the Cross. Obviously, theologizing must be led by the Holy Spirit, who teaches the truth. But it is important to recognize that the same Holy Spirit at work in us is also at work in the lives of believers in other contexts. To deny them the right to interpret the Scriptures for themselves is to deny this fact. (1994 Hiebert, 70)

Observations regarding How the Supra-cultural Message Communicated by the Cross Can Be Hindered to Impact Worldview and Culture

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Though God is supra-cultural, and human beings are limited by time, culture and experience, to name a few, He still communicates specifically to them via human communicational vehicles. Therefore, the fact that a given event occurred in the first century rather than in the twenty-first, in Palestine rather than in America, and in a Jewish society rather than in an American one, is extremely significant to the meanings of that event at every point.

As Kraft points out, words derive their meanings from their interaction with the contexts in which they participate (2013 Kraft, 106-107). Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner (4) observe that in every culture in the world phenomena such as authority, bureaucracy, creativity, good fellowship, verification, and accountability are experienced in different ways. That the same words are used to describe them tends to make a person unaware that his/her cultural biases and accustomed conduct may not be appropriate, or shared. This must be kept in mind not only when reading the Scriptures but also in teaching them. At the same time, even though human perception of God Himself and of His communications is limited and faulty, it is adequate for enabling acceptable understanding of and response to God.

The Message communicated by the Cross, therefore, begins with human cultures as they are and can be communicated in all of them. The Message must be understood by the people themselves if they are to respond in transformed lives and cultures. The role of the pastor or teacher is to teach people the principles revealed in the Romans' passage, for example, and help them to understand them within their cultural setting. At the same time, the final authority of the Bible must be maintained.

There is no one, single way to express the Message communicated by the Cross that is universal for everyone in all cultures. As soon as it is expressed, it is unavoidably done in a way that is more understandable and accessible for people in some cultures and less so for others. If the teacher forgets the first truth – that there is no culture-less presentation of the Gospel – he or she will think that there is only one true way to communicate it and he is on his way to a rigid, culturally bound conservatism. If she forgets the second truth – that there is only one true Message – she may fall into relativism, which can lead to liberalism. Either way, the pastor or teacher will be less faithful and less fruitful in ministry. Faithful contextualization, then, should adapt the communication and practice of all Scriptural teaching to a culture. (Keller 93-94)

Inadequate and Inaccurate Assumptions

To assume that accuracy in Biblical teaching is simply sincerity, or some form of spirituality, or expertise in such things as the original languages and the history of interpretation, can lead to error. The Message often can also be skewed by the unconscious influence of cultural assumptions. Though having such expertise or awareness of cultural influences, as Kraft observes, pastors and teachers need humility regarding how they think about their ability to understand accurately what was written from the perspective of another set of cultural assumptions - assumptions often quite different from theirs (1996 Kraft, 94).

As soon as the teacher chooses a language to speak in and particular words to use within that language -- dead to sin, dead to the law, alive unto God, etc.-- the culture-laden nature of words comes into play. Translating or communicating words from one language to another is not just a matter of locating the synonym in the other language. There are few true synonyms. Furthermore, as Keller (94) points out, as soon as you choose words, you are contextualizing, and you become more accessible to some people and less so to others. There is, therefore, no universal presentation of the Message communicated by the Cross for all people.

Correct and Valuable Approach – Cross-Cultural Approach

In order to impact worldview and culture with the message from the Bible, the first task is to remain faithful to Biblical truth. This begins with careful exegesis, in which the message of the Bible is understood within a specific cultural and historical context. The second task is hermeneutical, to discover what the meaning of the Biblical message is for us in our particular cultural and historical setting and then determine what our response should be. As this researcher has already mentioned, and as Hiebert points out, although the message of the Bible is supra cultural, people must be able to understand within their own heritage and time frame. (1985, Hiebert, 19)

God’s View and Intent vs Man’s View and Intent

A shift from a western academic philosophic mode (i.e., by western academics for western academics) to a cross-culturally perceptive mode for analyzing the Scriptures would greatly benefit all who seek to deal with the Christian message in nonwestern cultures. With regard to the Message communicated by the Cross, and recognizing that there certainly can be a difference between how God views a Scriptural passage and how one might interpret it, the following questions that Kraft provides may prove helpful: (1) What is the perspective from which the interpretation springs? (2) How does that perspective differ from other possible perspectives? And, (3) Could approaching the Scriptures from another perspective be both valid and helpful? These questions may help the pastor and teacher to understand that the wide variety of interpretive perspectives could very well yield a variety of theologies. Kraft has named this approach to theologizing “Christian ethnotheology.” (1996 Kraft, 94-95).

Keller (93) observes that every culture will find some parts of Scripture more attractive and other parts more offensive. It will be natural, then, for those in that culture to consider the inoffensive parts more “important” and “essential” than the offensive parts. This may be one reason for syncretism to appear, a picking and choosing among various teachings to create a message that does not confront or offend. Syncretism will occur when the purity of the Message communicated by the Cross becomes relative (Ott and Wilson, 124). Such syncretism can be a compromise with such ideas or theologies as liberty under grace or being dead to the law to do as I please, being dead to sin so that there is no longer temptation to deal with. The Message needs to be expressed in contemporary forms but not at the expense of its transforming power, prophetic voice, or convicting penetration (Luzbetak, 371).

Culture

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Culture is complex. It is a shared system of meanings that dictates what we pay attention to, how we act, and what we value (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 17).

It provides people a total design for living and deals with every aspect of life, offering them a way to regulate their lives by the cultural patterns they have been taught (1996 Kraft, 44,47). Scripture views God as the author of human culture and intimately involved in the world.

The Three Layers of Culture

There are three levels or layers of culture:

(1) The surface level or outer layer of culture consists of forms or “shapes,” or behavior that are the building blocks of culture – the who, what, when, where, what kind, and how. Such forms are the outward outline of a cultural pattern, the symbols minus their meanings. (Luzbetak, 225). Though forms provide only a superficial understanding of the culture, its “observable reality” consists of language, food, buildings, houses, monuments, agriculture, shrines, markets, fashions, and art. They are the symbols of a deeper level of culture. (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 29)

(2) The middle layer has to do with the meanings of symbols, the logic, the purposefulness, and other relationships underlying and connecting the forms. As is clear from the Old Testament, God’s primary concern has always been meaning, not form. “For it is love [meaning] that I desire, not sacrifice [form], and knowledge of God [meaning] rather holocausts [forms]” (Hos. 6:6).

(3) The deepest level of culture, namely the psychology of a society, is the basic assumptions, values, and drives--the starting-points in reasoning, reacting, and motivating (Luzbetak, 75). Culture is made up of beliefs and values by which people set their goals and judge their actions; those ideas, feelings, and values are important in understanding the nature of human cultures (1985, Hiebert, 28,34). Values define “good” and “bad” and are therefore closely related to the ideals shared by a group. Values also aspire or desire one to behave. (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 30, adapted). The essential core of culture consists of traditional ideas and especially their attached values (2013 Kraft, 38). This deepest level also includes worldview.

Affective Dimension of Culture

Besides the cognitive dimension of culture as described above, the affective dimension has to do with the people’s emotions, notions of beauty, tastes in food and dress, likes and dislikes, and ways of expressing joy and sorrow. The evaluative or normative dimension of culture refers to judgments of proper and improper behavior for men, for women, and for children. It includes the moral code that determines what is legal and illegal, righteous and sinful. (2009 Hiebert, 152-153).

G. Linwood Barney speaks of culture as resembling an onion (Keller, 90): The inmost core is a worldview – a set of normative beliefs about the world, cosmology, and human nature. Growing immediately out of that layer is a set of values – what is considered good, true, and beautiful. The third layer is a set of human institutions that carry on jurisprudence, education, family life, and governance on the basis of the values and worldview. Finally comes the most

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observable part of culture – human customs and behavior, material products, the built environment, and so on. Though helpful, some have rightly criticized this model – of an onion or a ladder – as not sufficient to show how much all these “layers” interact with and shape one another. The interactions are neither linear nor one-way.

'Man from Mars' Technique

Lloyd Kwast's (397-399) model of culture and his 'Man from Mars' technique can give a better understanding of culture through his different successive layers or levels of understanding through which culture is manifested. In this technique, one tries to imagine things from the perspective of a Martian (or an alien) who has landed on our planet and is observing a group of people in an enclosure.

The first thing the visitor would notice is the people’s behavior. This is the outer and most superficial layer and is composed of activities or behavior—the way things are done. On asking them about the reasons for their activities, the Martian comes to know that people chose to indulge in activities that are considered good. This differentiation of good or best comes from 'values'. According to Kwast, these values are ‘pre-set’ decisions that a culture makes between choices commonly faced. They represent the duties or activities that one 'ought to do' or 'should do' in order to fit in or conform to the pattern of life. On further examination the Martian realizes that these values are not decided arbitrarily but stem from a deeper level of understanding—cultural 'beliefs'. They answer the question for that culture: What is true? He finds out that certain beliefs (operating beliefs) greatly influence the values and behavior, whereas theoretical beliefs with its stated creeds have much less practical impact on values and behavior. Hence, certain people may have a different set of beliefs but behave in a similar manner, and vice versa. The deepest level of understanding—the very heart of any culture--that forms the basis for a particular set of beliefs is 'worldview', which answers the question: What is real? One’s own worldview provides a system of beliefs which are reflected in one’s actual values and behavior. Worldview is the core of every culture and refers to the way we see ourselves, relative to the world. It includes the ideas behind the meaning and reasons for human existence, the notions of evil, divine and supernatural.

But the main point I want to make here is that contextualizing the Message communicated by the Cross in a culture must account for all these aspects. It does not consist in merely changing someone’s behavior, but it involves one’s worldview as well.

The Concept of Culture

The origin of the modern concept of culture often is traced back to the German thinker Johann Gottfried von Herder, a contemporary of Immanuel Kant (Tennent, 168). Hiebert defines two concepts of culture (1983 Hiebert, 47): “Real culture,” which consists of the patterns of actual behavior and the thoughts of the people – what, in fact, they do and think. And “folk system,” which is the people’s description of their own culture – how they see and interpret it, their ideas of what is “proper” and what is “acceptable” behavior and of their awareness of the ways in which

their society deviates from these ideals. The point is that a study of both concepts is needed for a comprehensive understanding of a culture.

Niebuhr identifies three defining marks of culture: First, it is always social, and is concerned with the “organization of human beings,” not with our private lives. Second, culture is described as a human achievement. By this Niebuhr means that it is not the result of biology or nature, but it is always the fruit of “human purposiveness and effort.” Finally, these human achievements are all designed for an end or purpose: Culture is always concerned with the temporal and material realization of values” (Niebuhr, 33-36). This researcher will later explore in this paper his five positions that have characterized the Christian response to culture.

Any culture has its own moral code and its own culturally defined sins. It judges some acts to be righteous and others to be immoral. In traditional Indian society, for example, it is a sin for a woman to eat before her husband. If she does so, a village proverb says, she will be reborn in her next life as a snake. In China a person must venerate his or her ancestors by feeding them regularly; not to do so is sin. Each culture also has its own highest values and primary allegiances. Each has its own culturally defined goals. One culture pressures people to make economic success their highest goal; another assigns top priority to honor and fame, political power, the good will of ancestors, or the favor of God. (1985, Hiebert, 34).

Culture is a dynamic system of socially acquired and socially shared ideas according to which an interacting group of human beings is to adapt itself to its physical and social environment (Luzbetak, 74). Knowing and understanding the concepts of cultures enhances the possibility of the Message communicated by the Cross impacting it.

Characteristics of Culture

1. Anthropological Beliefs

Anthropologists agree on three characteristics of culture: It is not innate but learned; the various facets of culture are interrelated – you touch a culture in one place and everything else is affected; and it is shared and in effect defines the boundaries of different groups (1981a Hall, 16). Culture is learned, held in common by a society, and affects each part and contributes to the totality. It constantly changes as a result of innovations, internal pressures and cross-cultural borrowing. There is the outer layer of observable behavior, as shown above. But deeper in the culture are its values and ultimately its ideology and worldview, which is the most difficult to discover, analyze and modify, as Hesselgrave (100-103) points out.

2. Christian Beliefs

There are four main areas in which the common anthropological understanding of culture stands in conflict with the Christian understanding (Tennent, 171-174,181):

First, Christians affirm that God is the source and sustainer of both physical and social culture. A fundamental distinction between Christian anthropology and its secular counterpart is the Christian belief in the objective reality of God, who is beyond all human cultures and yet has

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chosen to reveal Himself in people who are created in His image, as well as within the particularities of culture.

Second, Christians affirm the objective reality of sin, rooted in the doctrine of the Fall, which has both personal and collective implications for human society. Anthropologists, in contrast, have no doctrine of sin.

Third, Christians affirm that God has revealed Himself within the context of human culture through human language and various cultural forms in specific cultural contexts. Secular anthropologists deny the objective reality of divine self-disclosure, including both the revelation of Scripture and God's supreme revelation in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. The Incarnation shows God's embrace of human culture and is certainly the ultimate act of cultural translation. God enters into the cultural context of humanity, "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us..." (Jn.1:14). The life of Jesus as concretely revealed in Jesus of Nazareth provides the basis for cultural evaluation.

Fourth, Christians affirm that a future, eschatological culture, known as the New Creation, already has begun to break into the present. Since there are no historical or cultural analogies for this, it is beyond the concern of secular anthropological studies.

Definitions of Culture

Today, "culture" has become a fairly flexible or workable concept that means something like "the set of values broadly shared by some subset of the human population" (Carson, 3). The term is the label anthropologists give to the complex structuring of customs and the assumptions that underlie them in terms of which people govern their lives (1996 Kraft, 31). Culture is "the integrated system of learned behavior patterns which are characteristic of the members of a society and which are not the result of biological inheritance" (1972 Hoebel, 6; quoted by 2013 Kraft, 38). [Hoebel, E. Adamson, 1972. *Anthropology: The Study of Man*, 4th ed. New York: McGraw Hill, 1972)]. Hiebert defines culture as "the more or less integrated system of beliefs, feelings, and values created and shared by a group of people that enable them to live together socially and that are communicated by means of their systems of symbols and rituals, patterns of behavior, and the material products they make" (2009 Hiebert, 150).

Niebuhr (32) defines culture as "the artificial, secondary environment which man superimposes on the natural. It comprises language, habits, ideas, beliefs, customs, social organization, inherited artifacts, technical processes, and values." Kraft sees culture as a society's complex, integrated coping mechanism, consisting of learned, patterned concepts and behavior, plus their underlying perspectives (worldview) and resulting artifacts (material culture) (1996 Kraft, 38).

Clyde Kluckhohn, in his book *Mirror for Man*, defines culture as: (1) "the total way of life of a people"; (2) "the social legacy the individual acquires from his group"; (3) "a way of thinking, feeling, and believing"; (4) "an abstraction from behavior"; (5) "a theory on the part of the anthropologist about the way in which a group of people in fact behave;" (6) a "storehouse of

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pooled learning”; (7) “a set of standardize orientations to recurrent problems”; (8) “learned behavior”; (9) a mechanism for the normative regulation for behavior; (10) “a set of techniques for adjusting both to the external environment and to other men”; and (11) “a precept of history” (Kluckhohn, 17 as quoted in 2000 Geertz, 4-5). [Kluckhohn, Clyde. 1949a. *Mirror of Man*. New York: McGraw-Hill (Fawcett Edition 1957)].

Not a few other definitions say something similar. The widely cited definition offered by Clifford Gertz combines conciseness and clarity: “[T]he culture concept... denotes an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes towards life” (Gertz, 89).

The Gospel and Culture

Christian transformation of a culture is primarily a matter of transformational change in the worldview of that culture (2013 Kraft, 275). As previously observed in this paper, although the Gospel is distinct from human cultures, it must always be expressed in cultural forms. Humans cannot receive it apart from their languages, symbols, and rituals. (1985, Hiebert, 54)

In light of God’s mercies and what He has done in Christ, as well as the fulfillment of His saving promises to Abraham, the apostle Paul exhorts the Roman church to present themselves as a living sacrifice that is holy, well-pleasing and fully acceptable to God. He further exhorts them to not be conformed to the thinking patterns, customs and standards of this present evil age with its own wisdom, ungodliness and pleasures. Rather, they are to be transformed by the renewing of their mind that has a different perspective and understanding so that they can approve (after a process of testing and examining) what is God’s will, which is good, well-pleasing and perfect in His sight (Rom.12:1-2). A renewed mind is one in which we think as Jesus thinks and have His perspective. This renewing is obviously a process and not a once-and-for-all event.

Christian sociologist H. Richard Niebuhr correctly acknowledges that Christians have held a wide variety of positions in how they have regarded culture. The main thrust of his classic book *Christ and Culture* is to explore five positions in which the Gospel and culture have historically related to one another, and that have characterized the Christian response to culture. Carson (12,63) observes that Niebuhr does not talk so much about the relationship between Christ and culture, as he does between two sources of authority as they compete within culture, namely, Christ [however he is understood within the various paradigms of mainstream Christendom] and every other source of authority divested of Christ [though Niebuhr is thinking primarily of secular or civil authority rather than the authority claimed by competing religions]. It is also good to keep in mind that the two terms “Christ” and “culture” cannot be set absolutely over against each other, not only because Christians constitute part of the culture, but also because all culture is included under Christ’s reign since all authority has been given to Him in heaven and on earth. In his book, Niebuhr discusses three basic and largely unconscious positions of a number of Western theologians that has to do with the relationship between Christ and Culture: Christ against culture, Christ in culture, and Christ above culture.

Niebuhr understood his first two models to be extreme opposites – “Christ against culture” sees culture most negatively as an expression of human fallenness, while “Christ of culture” sees it most positively, as an expression of God’s gracious activity. The other three models – “Christ above culture,” “Christ and culture in paradox,” and “Christ transforming culture” are positions between the two extremes, with “Christ above culture” having the most positive view of these three. The following are Niebuhr’s five basic ways of relating Christ to culture:

1. Christ against Culture

Whatever may be the customs of the society in which the Christian lives, and whatever the human achievements it conserves, Christ is seen as opposed to them—against them--, so that He confronts people with the challenge of an “either-or” decision (Niebuhr, 40). This view is exemplified by Tertullian, the Mennonites, and Leo Tolstoy.

The two themes of love and faith in Jesus Christ define the Christian life, according to Niebuhr (47-48). The counterpart of loyalty to Christ and the brethren is the rejection of the cultural society. “Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, love for the Father is not in him” (I John 2:15). The world is considered to be a secular society that appears as a realm under the power of evil, and dominated by the “lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the pride of life.”

To those who hold this view, the essence of “culture,” then is the evil they see around them. So, the way to holiness is to escape from and condemn “the world.” This is a widespread and ancient position found in the very beginnings of Christianity in the antagonism of early Christians toward Jewish culture and then, in response to Roman persecution, toward Greco-Roman culture. At a later date, monastic orders were developed in the belief that true holiness can be attained or maintained only by coming “out from among them” into physical separation from the evil world (i.e., the culture) around them. In contemporary experience a variety of fundamentalistic groups have strongly endorsed such an interpretation of culture and encouraged near monastic separateness in attitude if not in actual physical arrangements. (2013 Kraft, 82). The answer that advocates of God-against-culture positions typically recommend, therefore, is for Christians to withdraw, reject, escape, isolate, and insulate themselves from the world in order to develop and maintain holiness. But no one can really escape “culture.” Our culture is within us as well as around us. It is possible to replace, add to, transform, and in other ways alter our use of the cultural modeling we have received.

Many Christians obviously have assumed that God is against culture. They point to verses such as 1 John 2:15, “Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him,” and assume that what God means by “world” is what we mean by “culture.” But that point of view can be challenged, since the same term for world (*kosmos*) is in John 3:16, “God so loved the world.” The term is used in two ways - one to designate the people for whom God gave Himself in love, the other as a system governed by Satan.

There may items within culture that Christians may not accept, however. We must use cultural means to do whatever we do, even if this involves opposing part of a culture. Niebuhr

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considered this first model far too naïve regarding the power of redemption as well as the escape from the effects of original sin.

2. Christ of Culture

This second position is adopted by people who claim Jesus as the Messiah of their society, the One who fulfills its best hopes and aspirations. The model recognizes God at work in culture, and so it seeks to accommodate Christianity to it. These Christians don't seek Christ's endorsement for everything in their culture, but only for what they find to be the best in it; similarly, they tend to separate Christ from the things they judge to be barbaric or out-of-date Jewish notions about God and its history.

There is a fundamental agreement and relationship between Christ and culture in this position because of God's permeating presence in the midst of human culture and civilization. Loyalty to Jesus leads "the cultural Christians" to active participation in every cultural work, and to care for the preservation of all the great institutions (Niebuhr, 41,83,87,100,104).

One of the attractive features of Niebuhr's work is his effort to ground most of his five patterns in the Scriptures. This is certainly less successful with this model, paying little attention to Scripture, and then discussing the dominant movements, Gnosticism and Liberalism, that are themselves least grounded in Scripture. This position is also represented by Abelard, and Albrecht Ritschl who may be the best modern illustration of the Christ-of-culture type (Niebuhr, 94). Niebuhr considered this second model was not influenced enough by the cultural status quo and the ongoing reality of sin.

Between the two extremes above, Niebuhr now goes on to present three mediating positions, which he collectively refers to as "the church of the center" (Niebuhr, 116). He describes three varieties that all have been developed as theological positions and have been influential within important segments of Christianity.

3. Christ above Culture

Niebuhr understands this model to be the majority position in the history of the church. But it surfaces in three distinct forms, which constitute the three final entries in his five types: Christ above Culture—the synthesis type, the dualist type, and the conversionist/transformationist type.

Christ above Culture advocates building on the good in the culture with Christ, and adopts a synthesis approach, whereby the Gospel elevates and validates the best of culture while rejecting that which opposes the Gospel (Tennent, 161-162). Advocates of this position point to Scriptural passages such as Matthew 22:21; 5: 17-19; 23:2; Rom. 13:1,6, as indicating that Christians are obligated to take both Christ and culture and their requirements seriously, and to affirm the authority of each in its own sphere or domain. Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, and Thomas Aquinas and his followers are representative of this view. The model has had an important impact on Roman Catholic theology.

Though seeking to avoid an uncritical accommodation to culture, the “Christ above culture” position criticizes the “Christ of culture” position because it fails to see how sin has permeated human institutions. However, not rejecting culture, “Christ above culture” criticizes the “Christ against culture” view for not working hard to close the gap between Christ and culture. Synthesists “do not in fact face up to the radical evil present in all human work (Niebuhr, 148), and so Niebuhr saw this third model as not giving the due importance to the divine judgement.

The “Christians of the center” all recognize the importance of grace and the necessity of works of obedience, though their analyses vary. They cannot separate the works of human culture from the grace of God, for all those works are possible only by grace. But neither can they separate the experience of grace from cultural activity; how can men love the unseen God in response to His love without serving the visible brother in human society? (Niebuhr, 119).

4. Christ and Culture in Paradox

This is the second of the groups that belong to the “Christ above Culture” pattern. This dualistic model views Christians as citizens of two different realms, one sacred and one secular. It is by no means dualistic in the sense of dividing the world into realms of light and darkness, of kingdoms of God and Satan (Niebuhr, 149). For the dualist, the fundamental issue in life is not the line that must be drawn between Christians and the pagan or secular world, but between God and all humankind; the issue lies between the righteousness of God and the righteousness of self (Carson, 23). The dualist knows that he belongs to the culture and he can’t escape it, and that God sustains him in it; he is also aware that if God in His grace didn’t sustain the world in its sin, it wouldn’t exist for a moment (Niebuhr, 156). Those paradoxes spill over into law and grace, into divine wrath and divine mercy, and the dualist can’t evaluate culture without thinking of these ongoing inconsistent realities.

The duality and inescapable authority of both Christ and culture (which is corrupt) are recognized and are to be obeyed, but the opposition between them is also accepted, and so the believer lives with this tension (Niebuhr, 42,153,156). Yet the line is not drawn so much between the Gospel and culture as it is within the human heart. The conflict is between God and humanity. (Tennent, 162). The depravity of man is seen from cultured, sinful man confronting the holiness of divine grace (Niebuhr, 153). Sinful, fallen humanity produces corrupt cultural expressions within society. A new beginning must be made with the revelation of God’s grace. It is redeemed humanity who produces godly cultural expressions within society.

This position, therefore, sees God above culture and unconcerned with it. Those who take this stance typically affirm that God created the universe, got it going, and then virtually left it. Kraft observes that many tribal groups believe in God but largely ignore Him, because they feel He is too far away to be concerned about them and their problems (1996 Kraft, 93).

Martin Luther is most representative of this model (Niebuhr, 170). Influential Christian leaders such as Roger Williams and, in many respects, Luther have focused not so much on dealing with the relationship between a Christian community and a pagan world as with what they see as a basic conflict between God and human beings in general--be they non-Christian or Christian.

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Niebuhr saw this fourth model as too pessimistic regarding the possibility for cultural improvement.

5. Christ Transforming Culture (Christ the Transformer of Culture)

This is the third subcategory under the “Christ above Culture” pattern; this one is conversionist. It is important to understand that Niebuhr is not thinking so much of individual conversion, though doubtless that is to some extent included, as of the conversion of the culture itself.

Culture reflects the fallen state of humanity. Human nature is fallen or perverted, and this perversion not only appears in culture but is transmitted by it. Therefore, the opposition between Christ and all human institutions and customs is to be recognized. The Gospel optimistically stands as a transcultural or supra-cultural force that can redeem and transform culture by extending God’s kingdom into it and restoring culture back to God’s original intent (Tennent, 162). In Christ, humanity is redeemed, and culture can be renewed so as to glorify God and promote His purposes (Hesselgrave 116; Niebuhr, 43). This conversionist model, therefore, seeks to transform every part of culture with Christ. Culture is corrupted but convertible, usable, perhaps even redeemable by God’s grace and power. Christ is seen as the converter of man in his culture and society. (Niebuhr, 43). This view is represented by Augustine, John Calvin, and Wesley. F. D. Maurice was the most consistent of conversionists; he held fast to the principle that Christ is king (Niebuhr, 224).

When Niebuhr refers to John 1:1-3 and infers, “John could not say more forcefully that whatever is, is good” (Niebuhr, 197), it would have been more accurate to say that whatever the Logos originally made was good, since John is using the affirmations in Jn.1:1-3 as a format to expose the depravity of the world, cf.1:10.

Although Niebuhr never explicitly aligns himself with any of the five patterns that he treats in his book, what is notable about this fifth paradigm is that he offers no negative criticism. Of all the models, Niebuhr considered this last model to be the most balanced. Keller observes that this fifth model is neither as pessimistic about the culture as the sectarians and dualists nor as naively optimistic as the accommodationists and synthesisists (Keller, 194).

Not everyone who identifies with a movement holds all its views in precisely the same way. Nevertheless, each of Niebuhr’s models has running through it a guiding Biblical truth that helps Christians relate to culture. Each model helps us see the importance of that particular principle. Through their limitations, models encourage church leaders to avoid extremes and imbalances and to learn from all the ideas and categories. (Keller, 195)

Difficulties with Niebuhr’s Models of Culture

It is difficult to overestimate the influence of Niebuhr’s fivefold template, especially in the English-speaking world with so many books and essays having been written. Yet the models should be evaluated. For example, from the perspective of the twenty-first century, as Carson (31) points out, the only significant component that is missing is the voice of the contemporary church in the Two-Thirds world.

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Tennent poses four basic difficulties with Niebuhr's understanding: First Niebuhr's understanding of culture was constructed on the foundation of secular anthropology. So when discussing culture, Niebuhr insists on providing a "definition of the phenomenon without theological interpretation" (Niebuhr, 30). Because he understands culture as "the work of men's minds and hands," he inadvertently secularizes culture, creating an unbiblical dichotomy between human cultural activity and Christ—two wholly separate entities or forces. However, God is the author of human culture and His ongoing sustenance of, and redemptive activity within human culture is integral to a Biblical view of God. For example, the Incarnation and Pentecost, as well as God's ongoing redemptive acts in His church, all occur within culture and are fully part of it. (Tennent, 163). At the same time, Niebuhr does describe some of culture's chief characteristics, such as it always being social, involving human achievement, is being bound up with values. Therefore, it embraces ideas and beliefs as well as customs, social organization, and the life, though he restricts culture to the domain of the "temporal and material realization of values" (Niebuhr, 36), and by culture he means something like "culture-devoid-of-Christ" (Carson, 12).

Second, according to Tennent (164-165), Niebuhr's entire perspective on culture assumes a Christendom framework. With the collapse of Christendom, the fragmentation of the Western church, and the emergence of a post-Christian West, Niebuhr's perspective is increasingly problematic as a viable way to engage in discussion in the twenty-first century.

Third, the strength of Niebuhr's argument requires a monocultural perspective and, therefore, is increasingly unconvincing within the context of twenty-first century multiculturalism. Niebuhr envisions a world with many cultures, but none multicultural. He believes that cultural values are created and maintained by the single, dominant core group on behalf of the rest that occupies the center of the culture. This idea, according to Tennent (165-166) is not only considered too narrow an understanding of culture, but it is actually viewed as destructive because it deprives others the dignity of their own voice and values.

Fourth, Tennent (166) believes that Niebuhr's conception of culture is not set within an eschatological framework that sees the future as already breaking in to the present order. Niebuhr never articulates an understanding of the Holy Spirit as God's empowering presence who brings the New Creation into the present order. Instead, his secularized view of culture, which puts God in a supra cultural category, robs his entire project of the eschatological perspective that is so central to all Christian thinking.

The developers of each tradition were forced to struggle with the very complicated area of culture without benefit of the more precise understandings that are available today (2013 Kraft, 85-89). The Christian God should not be perceived either as against, merely in, or simply above culture. He is outside culture but works in terms of or through culture to accomplish His purposes. It seems that culture is basically a vehicle or milieu, neutral in essence, though warped by the pervasive influence of human sinfulness. Culture is the setting in which God chooses to relate to human being, and where all human understanding and maturing occur.

As D.A. Carson (62,71) rightly observes, instead of attempting to choose or reject one of the five models, it is better to ask in what sense they are grounded in the Scriptures and ponder their interrelations within the Scriptures. Then, how and when they should be emphasized under different circumstances exemplified in the Scriptures.

Cultural Differences and the Message Communicated by the Cross

Cultures are not totally different from each other. As stated previously in this paper, and as Hiebert notes, there are fundamental similarities underlying all cultures because they are rooted in the common humanity and shared experiences of all people. All people have bodies that function in the same ways. All experience birth, life, and death; joy, sadness, and pain; drives, fears, and needs. All create languages and cultures. And all have sinned and need salvation. (1985, Hiebert, 218). Without underestimating the differences that do exist between cultures, we need to recognize their basic commonalities. These unifying factors make it possible for people in one culture to understand those in another, and they also allow us to develop contexts that transcend cultural differences.

At the same time, it is certainly true that each society looks at the world in its own way and is set in its own language and culture. Symbols reflect the assumptions people make about reality, i.e., their worldview. Language is the most powerful of symbol systems. Different cultures have different symbols. Symbols are complex. They link together (1) meanings, (2) forms, (3) persons, (4) functions, and (5) contexts. Symbols must be shared by a group of people for communication to take place. (1985, Hiebert, 142-143). Through symbols ideas, feelings, and values are communicated. Geertz observes that sacred symbols function to synthesize a people's ethos--the tone, character, and quality of their life, its moral and aesthetic style and mood --and the picture they have of the way things actually are (2000 Geertz, 89). It's important, therefore, for the teacher or pastor to use cultural systems of symbols that are appropriate for the communication of the Message.

Cultural differences can affect the Message in several ways, therefore. Unless the messengers themselves use forms of communication the people understand, they will not receive the message. The Message communicated by the Cross also must be transmitted in such a way so that people understand it with a minimum distortion. Furthermore, the Message must be contextualized into local cultural forms. Forms of worship and teaching styles, for example, should be adapted to fit the cultural patterns. Finally, the people must develop a theology of the Cross in which Scripture speaks to them in their particular historical and cultural setting.

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