

TOWARD A BIBLICAL UNDERSTANDING OF CULTURE

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The missional church movement has significantly influenced the evangelical church in recent years, especially their philosophy of evangelism and worship. Missional advocates argue that the church is part of the *missio Dei*—the mission of God—and thus must see its ministries as fitting within that mission. Essential to the accomplishment of that mission is embedding the church in its target culture, which missional authors call “incarnation.” In order to evangelize the culture, they argue, churches must contextualize the message of the gospel in the culture. According to the grandfather of the missional movement, Lesslie Newbigin, contextualization is “the placing of the gospel in the total context of a culture at a particular moment, a moment that is shaped by the past and looks to the future.”¹

This thinking influences the missional philosophy of worship as well. While missional advocates reject the “attractional worship” model of the church growth movement, missional authors nevertheless insist that since believers are part of the culture in which they live, worship also must be contextualized to that culture. For example, Ed Stetzer insists that “worship must take on the expression that reflects the culture of the worshiper if it is to be authentic and make an impact.”² Contextualization is

¹ Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: the Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 1986), 2.

² Ed Stetzer and David Putman, *Breaking the Missional Code: Your Church Can Become a Missionary in Your Community* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2006), 100.

a significant emphasis of Alan Hirsch as well, who argues that “worship style, social dynamics, [and] liturgical expressions must result from the process of contextualizing the gospel in any given culture.”³ Mark Driscoll based his entire church planting strategy on the principle of contextualization, arguing that churches must be willing to regularly change their worship forms “in an effort to effectively communicate the gospel to as many people as possible in the cultures around them.”⁴ Likewise, according to Jon Paul Lepinski, “The need for the Church to remain effective in speaking the ‘current language’ and to successfully engage all people and age groups is a practice that can be seen in the life of Jesus. Christ’s earthly life manifests the importance of relevancy.”⁵

Essential to the missional church movement’s philosophy of evangelism and worship is their understanding of culture. Since they articulate incarnation and contextualization as important postures for accomplishing the *missio Dei*, missional proponents constantly discuss the importance of understanding culture, reaching culture, engaging culture, and redeeming culture. Therefore, an investigation into what they commonly mean by “culture” is necessary in order to evaluate their incarnational philosophy. This paper will synthesize the missional understanding of culture, reveal influences leading to this understanding of culture, and compare this contemporary idea of culture to categories of thought within the New Testament. Synthesis of this research

³ Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2009), 143.

⁴ Mark Driscoll, *The Radical Reformation: Reaching Out without Selling Out* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 80.

⁵ Jon Paul Lepinski, “Engaging Postmoderns In Worship: A Study Of Effective Techniques And Methods Utilized By Two Growing Churches In Northern California” (D. Min. Thesis, Liberty Theological Seminary, 2010), 6.

will reveal the appropriate biblical response toward the ideas of both culture and contextualization.

Common Missional Definitions of Culture

Likely the most influential early evangelical definition of culture comes from Lesslie Newbigin who claims that culture is “the sum total of ways of living built up by a human community and transmitted from one generation to another.”⁶ Darrell Guder cites this definition early in his influential *Missional Church*,⁷ thus revealing its impact upon later missional thinking in the Gospel and Our Culture Network and beyond. Other later definitions reflect similar thinking. For example, Alan Hirsch says, “Culture is a complex jungle of ideas, history, language, religious views, economic systems, political issues, and the like.”⁸ Kathy Black defines culture as “the sum attitudes, customs, and beliefs that distinguishes one group of people from another. Culture is transmitted through language, material objects, ritual, institutions, and art forms from one generation to the next.”⁹

Important to recognize is that none of these definitions draws its understanding of culture directly from Scripture but rather assumes the validity of the contemporary idea of culture on its own merits. Furthermore, beyond these few definitions, other

⁶ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Other Side of 1984: Questions for the Churches* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1983), 5.

⁷ Darrell Guder, *Missional Church: a Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 1998), 9.

⁸ Alan Hirsch and Debra Hirsch, *Untamed: Reactivating a Missional Form of Discipleship* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2010), 25.

⁹ Kathy Black, *Culturally-Conscious Worship* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2000), 8.

missional authors seem to assume the idea of culture without even defining it. This reveals that missional authors utilize the prevailing contemporary notion of culture by default in their emphases upon incarnation and contextualization. This in itself is not necessarily problematic, but in order to understand what missional proponents mean by “culture,” this requires further research into what led to the development of the idea as it exists today.

The Historical Development of the Missional Idea of Culture¹⁰

Historically, the term “culture” did not emerge in its common use until the late 18th century. The term itself is much older, its Latin roots centered squarely in discussion of agriculture. As early as 1776, however, the term began to be used metaphorically to describe what Matthew Arnold called “the best which has been thought and said in the world.”¹¹ The term used this way first entered German philosophy in Johann Gottfried Herder’s 1776 *Reflections on the Philosophy of History*, in which he argued that each civilization progresses through a process of enlightenment at which point it begins to produce “culture.” Thus the term was first used to describe what would today be more commonly called “high culture” or “the arts.” This introduced a new vocabulary for

¹⁰ This survey is necessarily simplistic and notes only the three most significant stages in the development of the contemporary idea of culture. Historians usually note at least four and as many as seven stages. For a more thorough discussion, see Ernest Lester Schusky, *The Study of Cultural Anthropology* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1975); Merwyn S. Garbarino, *Sociocultural Theory in Anthropology: a Short History* (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 1983); Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: a New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997); Roger M. Keesing and Andrew Strathern, *Cultural Anthropology: a Contemporary Perspective* (Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1998); Jerry D. Moore, *Visions of Culture: an Introduction to Anthropological Theories and Theorists* (Lanham, MD: Rowman Altamira, 2009); Jenell Williams Paris and Brian M. Howell, *Introducing Cultural Anthropology: A Christian Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010).

¹¹ Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy: and Essay in Political and Social Criticism* (London: Smith, Elder, and Co, 1869), viii.

describing differences among people groups, but it was not until the rise of the formal discipline of cultural anthropology that the broader idea of culture took its present form.

Darwinian evolutionism influenced all aspects of human inquiry in the mid-nineteenth century, including explanation of cultural differences. For example, Edward Tylor, founding father of British anthropology, developed a theory of cultural evolution that describes stages of human history from primitivism to advancement. Tylor was attempting to explain differences among various people groups, leading to the formation of the discipline of cultural anthropology. This new discipline involved “the description, interpretation, and analysis of similarities and differences in human cultures.”¹² Tylor’s ideas reflect Herder’s, but his understanding of culture was much more broad. Instead of defining culture as the more advanced achievements of a society, Tylor defined culture as “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.”¹³ Important to this definition is that everything in human society is a subset of the broader idea of culture, even religion; the subtitle to Tylor’s monumental book reveals different aspects of what he understood as culture: “Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art, and Custom.” Schusky explains how this all-encompassing definition of culture developed to form the field of anthropology:

Scholars recast the history of marriage, religion, politics, the family, mythology, and other social forms, speculating on their origin and stage of evolution. Because such a wide variety of forms were examined, some intellectuals concluded that all aspects

¹² Paris and Howell, *Introducing Cultural Anthropology*, 4.

¹³ Edward B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art, and Custom*. (London: John Murray, 1871), 1.

of human behavior were valid fields for study. Organization of the study should fall to anthropology, and its concept of culture should be such as to allow investigation of all these facets of human activity.¹⁴

Taylor was also an early advocate of cultural relativism, “the judgment of a practice only in relation to its cultural setting.”¹⁵

The anthropological notion of culture took a third step in America with Franz Boas, who Jerry Moore calls “the most important single force in shaping American anthropology.”¹⁶ Boas shifted cultural anthropology from an evolutionist position to what is called Historicism, which argues that cultures are not progressive advancements of one continuous evolutionary development, but rather that each distinct culture is a product of very specific historical contexts and thus can be understood only in light of those contexts. He was among the first to speak of plural cultures that share no direct connections; similarities that exist between cultures, Boas argued, are purely arbitrary or at most due to similar historical situations, an idea called Particularism. This further enforced the notion of cultural relativism, denying any universal laws of culture and advancing the idea to insist that cultures with different historical backgrounds may not be compared at all. Every cultural expression is learned within a particular historical setting; nothing is innate. This view of human culture became established, especially in American anthropology, becoming the *de facto* explanation for differences among civilizations.

It was in this anthropological climate that the missional idea of culture took shape. Charles H. Kraft acknowledges that the missional idea of culture draws from

¹⁴ Schusky, *The Study of Cultural Anthropology*, 10.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁶ Moore, *Visions of Culture*, 42.

cultural anthropology: “When it comes to the analysis of such cultural contexts, however, it is likely that contemporary disciplines such as anthropology and linguistics, dedicated as they are to a primary focus on these issues, may be able to provide us with sharper tools for analysis than the disciplines of history and philology have provided.”¹⁷ Even if not deliberate, however, most missional authors assume the cultural anthropology idea of culture. For example, one cannot help but notice the similarity between Tylor’s influential definition of culture (“that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.”¹⁸) and Newbigin’s definition (“the sum total of ways of living built up by a human community and transmitted from one generation to another”¹⁹). Yet the connection runs deeper than similarities between definitions. Like cultural anthropology, the missional church views the idea of culture and particular cultural expressions as neutral. Cultures develop independently of each other and may not be compared. Evangelical authors may cite specific content as sinful, but no cultural expression is unredeemable. For example Stetzer states that “there is no such thing as Christian music, only Christian lyrics”²⁰ and that “God has no preference regarding style,”²¹ implying that cultural forms are neutral and only lyrics may be judged as moral or immoral. Driscoll

¹⁷ Charles H. Kraft, “Interpreting in Cultural Context,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 21, no. 4 (December 1978): 358.

¹⁸ Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, 1.

¹⁹ Newbigin, *The Other Side of 1984*, 5.

²⁰ Ed Stetzer, *Planting Missional Churches* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2006), 267.

²¹ Elmer Towns and Edward Stetzer, *Perimeters of Light: Biblical Boundaries for the Emerging Church* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2004), 43.

implies the neutrality of culture by insisting that “it was God who created cultures,”²² thereby rendering various cultural forms intrinsically good. Stanley Parris gets to the root of the issue by insisting that since “a single biblical style is not commanded in Scripture,”²³ cultural styles are neutral. Mark Snoberger helpfully summarizes the standard evangelical assumption of cultural neutrality:

There is a general assumption that culture is neutral, and either independent of or essentially in harmony with God: just as man retains the image of God in microcosm, so culture retains the image of God in macrocosm. As such, culture possesses aspects and attributes that escape, to a large extent, the effects of depravity. The Christian response to culture is merely to bridle various aspects of culture and employ them for their divinely intended end—glory of God.²⁴

Most importantly, like cultural anthropologists, missional advocates understand religion as but one component of culture rather than the other way around. For example, Hirsch lists “religious views” as one element of culture.²⁵ This is also clear by how missional authors discuss the relationship between culture and evangelism. According to missional authors, the gospel must be “contextualized” in a given culture so that the recipients will accept the message and change their religion, but the culture itself must not change. John Stott insists that conversion will not mean a change of culture: “True, conversion involves repentance, and repentance is renunciation. Yet this does not require the convert to step right out of his former culture into a Christian sub-culture

²² Driscoll, *Radical Reformation*, 80.

²³ Stanley Glenn Parris, “Instituting a Missional Worship Style in a Local Church Developed from an Analysis of the Culture” (PhD diss., Asbury Theological Seminary, 2008), 2.

²⁴ Mark A. Snoberger, “Noetic Sin, Neutrality, and Contextualization: How Culture Receives the Gospel,” *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 9 (2004): 357.

²⁵ Hirsch and Hirsch, *Untamed*, 25.

which is totally distinctive.”²⁶ Additionally, Mark Driscoll explains that the gospel is something that “must be fitted to” culture.²⁷ Subsequent believers are then encouraged to worship using the cultural forms most natural to them. For example, Guder argues that “our changing cultural context also requires that we change our worship forms so that Christians shaped by late modernity can express their faith authentically and honestly,”²⁸ which follows the same line of reasoning as Hirsch when he claims that “it is from within their own cultural expressions that the nations will worship.”²⁹ Kimball also reflects this idea when he says, “Since worship is about our expressing love and adoration to God and leaders teaching people about God, then of course the culture will shape our expressions of worship.”³⁰ Religion changes while culture remains unchanged, implying the understanding that religion is only one element within the larger idea of culture.

Contextualization

The missional adaptation of the anthropological definition of culture provides the foundation for the missional objective of contextualization. Like the idea of culture, the term “contextualization” is a relatively recent development. Hesselgrave and Rommen provide a helpful survey of contextualization’s history in *Contextualization*:

²⁶ John R. W. Stott, *Christian Mission in the Modern World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1975), 181.

²⁷ Driscoll, *Radical Reformation*, 20.

²⁸ Darrell Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 2000), 157.

²⁹ Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, 138.

³⁰ Dan Kimball, *Emerging Worship: Creating Worship Gatherings for New Generations* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 298.

*Meanings, Methods, and Models.*³¹ The idea of contextualization is rooted in the missions debates of the Division on World Missions and Evangelism (DWME) of the World Council of Churches (WCC). Influenced by the anthropological understanding of culture and thus concerned that each civilization develop its own theology and method of church ministry in its own cultural context, the DWME began to condemn the “theological imperialism” of the church in the West. Its 1972-73 Bangkok Conference argued that non-Western churches should develop their own ideas “in a theology, a liturgy, a praxis, a form of community, rooted in their own culture.”³² This desire for each church to be indigenized within its culture, clearly influenced by a Historicism view of culture and a belief in cultural neutrality, became known as “contextualization.” Hesselgrave and Rommen explain how this new concept differed from previous ways of thinking:

Contextualization is a new word—a technical neologism. It may also signal a new (or renewed) sensitivity to the need for adaptation to cultural context. To its originators it involved a new point of departure and a new approach to theologizing and to theological education: namely, praxis or involvement in the struggle for justice within the existential situation in which men and women find themselves today. As such it goes well beyond the concept of indigenization which Henry Venn, Rufus Anderson, and their successors defined in terms of an autonomous (self-supporting, self-governing, and self-propagating) church.³³

Byang H. Kato explains the importance of this development:

This is a new term imported into theology to express a deeper concept than indigenization ever does. We understand the term to mean making concepts or

³¹ David J. Hesselgrave and Edward Rommen, *Contextualization: Meanings, Methods, and Models* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2003), 28–35.

³² “Your Kingdom Come” (a pamphlet published by the World Conference on Mission and Evangelism, n.d.), 5.

³³ Hesselgrave and Rommen, *Contextualization*, 32.

ideals relevant in a given situation. In reference to Christian practices, it is an effort to express the never changing Word of God in ever changing modes of relevance. Since the Gospel message is inspired but the mode of its expression is not, contextualization of the modes of expression is not only right but necessary.³⁴

Like many of the missiological ideas that sprang from the WCC discussions of the 1970s, the idea of contextualization originally implied a relativism in every aspect of the church, including potentially theology and even morality. Conservative evangelicals adopted the term but reshaped it to mean communication of an unchanging biblical message in changing cultural expressions. Hesselgrave and Rommen explain: “Most conservative evangelicals were already enamored with the word *contextualization*. They chose to adopt and redefine it where they rejected the meaning prescribed by the TEF [Theological Education Fund] initiators. They agreed that the new definition should reveal a sensitivity to context and a fidelity to Scripture.”³⁵ They go on to explain how these conservative evangelicals disagreed on particular nuances of their new definition and note that “there is not yet a commonly accepted definition of the word *contextualization*.”³⁶

Part of Hesselgrave and Rommen’s motive for writing their book is to offer some clarity on this problem, and their conclusions strongly influenced the contemporary missional understanding of contextualization. In particular, Hesselgrave and Rommen distinguish between cultural contextualization and theological contextualization, and they insist that biblical contextualization must be “true to both indigenous culture and the

³⁴ Byang H. Kato, “The Gospel, Cultural Context and Religious Syncretism,” in *Let the Earth Hear His Voice*, ed. J. D. Douglas (Minneapolis: World Wide Publications, 1975), 1217.

³⁵ Hesselgrave and Rommen, *Contextualization*, 33.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 35.

authority of Scripture.”³⁷ In other words, a conservative evangelical will not change the essential message of the gospel, but everything else is merely “cultural” and must be contextualized. Thus Hesselgrave and Rommen’s definition of contextualization has been adopted to a significant extent by missional advocates:

Christian contextualization can be thought of as the attempt to communicate the message of the person, works, Word, and will of God in a way that is faithful to God’s revelation, especially as it is put forth in the teachings of Holy Scripture, and that is meaningful to respondents in their respective cultural and existential contexts. Contextualization is both verbal and nonverbal and has to do with theologizing; Bible translation, interpretation, and application; incarnational lifestyle; evangelism; Christian instruction; church planting and growth; church organization; worship style—indeed all of those activities involved in carrying out the Great Commission.³⁸

Essentially, the missional emphasis of contextualization is a natural application of the newly developed anthropological view of culture. Hesselgrave and Rommen acknowledge this connection:

But on a broader scale it has remained for those of more recent times to arrive at an enlarged concept of context and a deepened understanding of culture. A new word was needed to denote the ways in which we adjust messages to cultural contexts and go about the doing of theology itself. That new word is *contextualization*.³⁹

Conclusion

Both the ideas of culture and contextualization are essential components of the missional approach to all aspects of church ministry, including evangelism and worship. The modern definition of culture developed out of relatively recent ideas about anthropology. Prior to the Enlightenment, people were differentiated primarily by their

³⁷ Ibid., 55.

³⁸ Ibid., 200.

³⁹ Ibid., 28. Emphasis original.

religion; later, the way to account for differences was “culture.” Neither NT authors nor pre-Enlightenment Christian authors discuss “culture” per se.

However, the fact that the contemporary idea of culture emerged from twentieth-century cultural anthropology does not necessarily imply that it is an invalid or unbiblical idea. Many complex ideas take on contemporary articulations. The important question for a biblical evaluation of the common missional understanding of culture is which ideas in Scripture parallel the contemporary notion of culture.

New Testament Equivalents to the Missional Idea of Culture

At least three separate categories of NT Greek terms possibly parallel the more contemporary idea of culture.

“Race”-related Terms

The first grouping includes terms translated with the English words “race,” “tribe,” “nation,” “people” or “languages.” These ideas are probably the most commonly cited by missional authors who are seeking to imply cultural neutrality. For example, Driscoll equates “race,” “nation,” and “culture,” alluding to Revelation 7:9 when he insists that “God promised that people from every race, culture, language, and nation will be present to worship him as their culture follows them into heaven.”⁴⁰

The term representative of this group that Christian anthropologists mostly cite is *ἔθνος* (*ethnos*). For example, in commenting on the Matthew 28:16-20, Christian cultural anthropologists Paris and Howell say that “the word translated ‘nations’ here

⁴⁰ Driscoll, *Radical Reformation*, 100.

(*ethnos*) refers to the culture of a people, an ethnic group.”⁴¹ They directly equate *ἔθνος* with culture and insist that “cultural anthropology helps us fulfill the Great Commission by preparing Christians to go to all *ethnē* and speak and live effectively.”⁴² Additionally, the popularity of terms such as “ethnodoxology” among missional worship advocates reveals the assumption that this NT term proves the necessity of a multicultural approach to worship.

Of the 164 times it appears in the NT, the ESV translates *ἔθνος* as “Gentile” 96 times, “nation” 68 times, “pagans” three times, and “people” two times. Lexicons⁴³ define the term as “a multitude (whether of men or of beasts) associated or living together, . . . a multitude of individuals of the same nature or genus, . . . a race, nation,

⁴¹ Paris and Howell, *Introducing Cultural Anthropology*, 23.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ While lexical definitions of terms are helpful in determining their meaning and use in the NT, it is important to recognize that authors of lexicons themselves often fall prey to contemporary reorientation of ideas. This is especially a potential problem in this area of cultural neutrality. If authors of a lexicon have been influenced enough by cultural anthropology such that they embrace each of its conclusions about culture and race, their definitions of terms such as *ἔθνος* may reflect a colored interpretation. Vern Polythress exposes this very sort of influence in “How Have Inclusiveness and Tolerance Affected the Bauer-Danker Greek Lexicon of the New Testament (BDAG)?” (*JETS* 46:4 [Dec 2003]: 574-587). He argues that differences in the third edition of BDAG from previous editions “raise questions about political influence on lexical description” (574). Danker himself addresses the issue in the preface of the third edition:

Also of concern are respect for inclusiveness and tolerance. But a scientific work dare not become a reservoir for ideological pleading, and culture-bound expressions must be given their due lest history be denied its day in court. It is an undeniable fact that God is primarily viewed patriarchally in the Bible, but translation must avoid exaggeration of the datum. “Brother” is a legitimate rendering of many instances of the term *ἀδελψός*, but when it appears that the term in the plural includes women (as in a letter to a congregation) some functional equivalent, such as “brothers and sisters,” is required (*BDAG*, viii).

However, Danker clearly begins with an *a priori* acceptance of the contemporary anthropological notion of culture when he speaks of “culture-bound expressions,” and Polythress reveals several examples where political correctness influences changes in definitions. This is why although the lexical definitions are helpful, investigation into the contextual uses of each term is also very important in determining their range of meaning.

people group,”⁴⁴ or even specifically link it to the idea of culture: “a people, a large group based on various cultural, physical or geographic ties.”⁴⁵ Lexicons do not define ἔθνος as culture itself, however, but rather identify culture as one element that unites an ἔθνος, as in Bullinger, who defines the term as “a number of people living together bound together by like habits and customs; then generally people, tribe, nation, with reference to the connection with each other rather than the separation from others by descent, language or constitution.”⁴⁶

Therefore, the term is used to designate groups of people who identify with common values. Cultural anthropologists assume that NT authors use ἔθνος as a parallel to “culture,” yet this correspondence falls outside the common usage of the term. An ἔθνος may be united by shared culture, but it is not the same as culture. Hiebert agrees: “*Nation (ethnos)* means a community of people held together by the same laws, customs, and mutual interests.”⁴⁷ The term refers to the group of people, not to the culture around which the group unites.

Furthermore, use of the term in the NT is normally intended to *blur cultural differences* rather than to highlight them. For example, the two passages cited above by

⁴⁴ James Strong, *The Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible: Showing Every Word of the Text of the Common English Version of the Canonical Books, and Every Occurrence of Each Word in Regular Order, Together with Dictionaries of the Hebrew and Greek Words of the Original, with References to the English Words* (Hendrickson, 2004).

⁴⁵ James Swanson, *Dictionary of Biblical Languages With Semantic Domains: Greek (New Testament)* (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 1997).

⁴⁶ Ethelbert William Bullinger, *A Critical Lexicon and Concordance to the English and Greek New Testament: Together with an Index of Greek Words, and Several Appendices* (London: Longmans Green, 1908), 316.

⁴⁷ D. Edmond Hiebert, *First Peter* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1984), 134.

missional and anthropological writers use *ἔθνος* most clearly to signify something broader than the contemporary notion of culture. In Matthew 28:19, Jesus commands his followers to “teach all nations [*ἔθνος*].” Carson suggests that Matthew “uses *ethnē* in its basic sense of ‘tribes,’ ‘nations,’ or ‘peoples’ and means ‘all peoples [without distinction]’ or ‘all nations [without distinction].”⁴⁸ The point of the command is not, necessarily, to emphasize the cross-cultural reality of evangelizing each distinct cultural group as Engle insists;⁴⁹ rather “the aim of Jesus’ disciples . . . is to make disciples of all men everywhere, without distinction.”⁵⁰

The other passage often cited by missional authors to prove that every culture is legitimate since every nation will be admitted into heaven is Revelation 5:9: “And they sang a new song, saying, “Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe [*φυλῆς*] and language [*γλώσσης*] and people [*λαοῦ*] and nation [*ἔθνους*].”⁵¹ Here John uses four “race”-related terms, but once again, John uses the terms not to emphasize cultural distinctions between various people groups but rather to signify all peoples without national or cultural distinctions. For example, Mounce says of the “race”-related terms in

⁴⁸ Frank E. Gaebelin, ed., *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Volume 8: Matthew, Mark, Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984), 596.

⁴⁹ “The cross-cultural phenomena implicit in worldwide evangelism are strikingly embedded in the four-fold societal factors, repeated three times in Genesis 10. The LXX specifies the *land* (*γῆ*), the *language* (*γλώσσαν*), the *people* (*φυλαῖς*, i.e., *ethnic group*), the *nation* (*ἔθνεσιν*, i.e., “The multitude bound together by like habits, customs, peculiarities,” in brief, perhaps a *political entity*). The geographical, linguistic, ethnic, and political factors are emphasized in Gen 10:5, 20, 31. The root *ἔθνος*- is the same as the one attributed to Christ in Matt 28:19” (Richard W. Engle, “Contextualization in Missions: A Biblical and Theological Appraisal” *Grace Theological Journal*, no. 4 [1983]: 94).

⁵⁰ Gaebelin, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Volume 8: Matthew, Mark, Luke*, 596.

⁵¹ These same four terms appear also in 7:9, 11:9, 13:7, and 14:6.

this verse, “It is fruitless to attempt a distinction between these terms as ethnic, linguistic, political, etc. The Seer is stressing the universal nature of the church and for this purpose piles up phrases for their rhetorical value.”⁵² Likewise, Thomas argues, “The enumeration includes representatives of every nationality, without distinction of race, geographical location, or political persuasion.”⁵³ These conclusions made for the use of *ἔθνος* apply equally to nearly synonymous terms found in Revelation 5:9 such as *φυλή* (*phulē*; “tribe”), *γλῶσσα* (*glōssa*; “language”), and *λαός* (*laos*; “people”). MacLeod summarizes common definitions for such race-related terms:

(1) The word “tribe” (*φυλή*) denotes “a group bound together by common descent or blood-relationship.” In the New Testament most references are to the tribes of Israel. In Revelation 5:9 the word includes the redeemed from the Gentile world, which also includes tribal groups (Christian Maurer, “*φυλή*,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 9 [1974], 245–50, esp. 245, 250). Bauer, Arndt, and Gingrich say that *φυλή* means “a subgroup of a nation characterized by a distinctive blood line, tribe” (*A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 1069). (2) “Tongue” (*γλῶσσα*) refers to a people group distinguished by their language (Johannes Behm, “*γλῶσσα*,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 1 [1964], 722). (3) “People” (*λαός*) speaks of a race, that is, “a body of people with common cultural bonds . . . a people-group” (Bauer, Arndt, and Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 586). (4) “Nation” (*ἔθνος*) means “a body of persons united by kinship, culture, and common traditions” (Ibid., 276).⁵⁴

A final passage of note that uses *ἔθνος* in a slightly different manner is 1 Peter 2:9: “But you are a chosen race [*γένος*], a royal priesthood, a holy nation [*ἔθνος*], a people [*λαός*] for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.” Peter calls the church a holy nation,

⁵² Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 1998), 136.

⁵³ Robert Thomas, *Revelation 1-7 Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1992), 401.

⁵⁴ David J. MacLeod, “The Adoration Of God The Redeemer: An Exposition Of Revelation 5:8–14,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 164, no. 656 (December 2007): 464.

here being used metaphorically to describe the new people God has created in the church. Hiebert explains:

The term was also used at the times of Israel as the people of God united by their covenantal relation to Him, making them distinctly His nation. It is in that latter sense that Peter applied the term to the church, which forms a unique international nation having a common spiritual life from God and committed to His rule. *Holy* indicates its separation from the nations of the world and consecration to God and His service. Its position of separation demands that the members must not, like Israel of old, stoop to the sinful practices of the world (1:15-17).⁵⁵

The same is true for γένος (*genos*; “race”), which has a similar meaning: “The word *race* (*genos*) denotes the descendants of a common ancestor and thus designates a people with a common heritage, sharing the unity of a common life.”⁵⁶ And once again, “people” (λαός) describes a group united by a similar ancestry.

These examples of the use of “race”-related terms by NT authors indicate that the terms signify distinct groups of people that unify around common heritage, geographical location, language, and/or custom. “Culture” as defined by contemporary anthropologists may be one of the elements around which an ἔθνος unifies, but an ἔθνος is not “culture” itself. Similarly, φυλή is not a lineage, it is a people unity by lineage; likewise, although γλῶσσα is often used to specifically designate languages, in these cases it is being used metaphorically to signify people united by a common language; in the same way λαός and ἔθνος identify groups united by politics or culture, but they do not equal culture itself.

⁵⁵ Hiebert, *First Peter*, 134.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 132.

The implication here is twofold: First, the “culture” of a people is not arbitrary; groups unite around shared beliefs, values, and lineage, which in turn produces a way of living that is characteristic of the group. Second, contrary to some missional authors, the NT does not indicate that all *cultures* will be present in the eschaton but rather that all *kinds of people regardless of distinctions* will be present. This alone does not discredit the position of cultural neutrality, but appealing to race-related terms and their relationship to salvation and the life to come cannot prove the position.

“World”-related Terms

The second category of NT terms that may indicate a parallel with the contemporary idea of “culture” is words related to the “world order.” These terms include *αἰών* (*aiōn*; “age,” “world”) and *κόσμος* (*kosmos*; “world”). These terms can simply refer to the physical earth, people in general, or a period of time. However, at least three passages in particular use “world”-related terms in ways that might be construed as parallel to the anthropological idea of culture.

The first is John 17:14-16:

I have given them your word, and the world [*κόσμος*] has hated them because they are not of the world [*κόσμου*], just as I am not of the world [*κόσμου*]. I do not ask that you take them out of the world [*κόσμου*], but that you keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world [*κόσμου*], just as I am not of the world [*κόσμου*].

Here *κόσμος* is being used to identify an ordered world-system. In this context it is not necessarily positive or negative; all that is indicated is that (1) Christ is not “of” it, (2) believers are not “of” it, but they are “in” it, and (3) the “evil one” is in some way related to it. While this seems to have a connection with the contemporary idea of culture, this

ordered system includes the values and orientation that create culture but does not appear to identify culture itself.

A related passage is 1 John 2:15-17. Here *κόσμος* is treated decidedly negatively:

Do not love the world [*κόσμον*] or the things in the world [*κόσμῳ*]. If anyone loves the world [*κόσμον*], the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world [*κόσμῳ*]—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life—is not from the Father but is from the world [*κόσμου*]. And the world [*κόσμος*] is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever.

Barket notes that John uses *κόσμος* here far differently than he did in John 3:16: “Here, however, the world is presented as the evil system totally under the grip of the devil (cf. 1 John 5:19; John 12:31; 14:30). It is the ‘godless world’ (NEB), the world of ‘emptiness and evil,’ the world of enmity against God (James 4:4).”⁵⁷ Once again, however, this world-system does not appear to be the same thing as what anthropologists call culture. Not all of what mankind produces is godless, empty, or at enmity with God.

The final passage is Romans 12:2. This time the term in question is *αἰών* and once again this “world”-related term is treated negatively:

Do not be conformed to this world [*αἰῶνι*], but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

The term appears to be used nearly synonymously here with how John used *κόσμος* in John 14 and 1 John 2; it describes a world-system to which believers are not to be conformed. But once again, the term appears to signify an ordered system of values alienated from God rather than signifying culture itself.

⁵⁷ Frank E. Gaebelin, ed., *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Volume 12: Hebrews Through Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), 321.

Interestingly, equating this group of terms with culture is a tool of both the Christian anthropologist who argues that the “world” is neutral and the fundamentalist who insists that the “world” is corrupt. As with the previous group of terms, many evangelicals equate this group of terms with “culture” and thus seek to prove cultural neutrality. For example, after discussing the meaning of *κόσμος* and linking it to God’s creative act, Armstrong argues,

To conclude, we must say that in a very important sense worldliness, understood as concern for this world and the life we live in it, is a proper and noble response to both God and His creation. We must identify with this planet. As worshipers of the true and living God we must be concerned for all that affects this world, especially as it touches upon humanity—physically, socially and spiritually. A good God created a good world, and we, saved because of His goodness and kindness, must exercise our proper dominion in this world (Gen. 1:26). If culture is “the total pattern of human behavior and its products, a society’s way of life and thinking,” then we who follow the true God must be, of all people, most interested in human culture and attempts to construct and preserve society.⁵⁸

On the other hand, David Wells defines at least one use of the term *κόσμος* as “the ways in which fallen aspirations are given public expression in any given culture.”⁵⁹ He argues that when used in this sense, the NT “is speaking of that system of values which takes root in any given culture, the system of values that arises from fallen human nature, and which for that reason marginalizes (pushes to the periphery) God, His truth, and His Christ.”⁶⁰ He continues,

Worldliness is all in a society that validates the fallenness within us. Worldliness is everything in our culture that makes sin look normal and which makes righteousness

⁵⁸ John H. Armstrong, “Editor’s Introduction: This Is My Father’s World,” *Reformation and Revival* 7, no. 3 (Summer 1998): 15–16.

⁵⁹ David F. Wells, “Marketing the Church: Analysis and Assessment,” *Faith and Mission* 12, no. 2 (Spring 2005): 15.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

look strange and bizarre. Worldliness is that which says it's okay to be self-righteous, self-centered, self-satisfied, self-aggrandizing, and self-promoting. Those things are all okay, our culture says. Then it says that those who pursue self-denial or self-effacement for Christ's sake are stupid. That is worldliness—how life appears from this fallen center within myself, this center which has taken the place of God and of His truth. That, I take it, is what the New Testament has in view when it speaks about worldliness. It is talking about a cultural phenomenon, about the public environment by which we are surrounded, that which validates all that is fallen within us. It is what we encounter in movies, in television, in the workplace, in the people with whom we rub shoulders. We hear it in conversations; we see it in advertisements; it is in the air all the time.⁶¹

Regardless of how they are used, however, these world-related terms do not describe culture itself but rather the value systems that may be part of the larger idea of culture.

“Behavior”-related Terms

A third category of NT terms that could parallel the contemporary concept of culture is terms related to behavior. Such terms include terms most often translated as “behavior,” “conduct,” or “way of life.”

Among these terms, NT authors most often use *ἀναστροφή* (*anastrophē*) in this manner. Bullinger defines the term as “life, as made up of actions; mode of life, conduct, deportment.”⁶² The Apostle Paul uses the term to describe his behavior in his former life of Judaism: “For you have heard of my former life [*ποτε ἀναστροφήν*] in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it” (Gal 1:13). Boice says of Paul's use of the term here,

The word Paul used for his former “way of life” (*anastrophē*) is singularly appropriate to the Jewish faith. Judaism was not a mask to be donned or doffed at will, as was the case with so many of the pagan religions. Judaism was a way of life,

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Bullinger, *A Critical Lexicon and Concordance to the English and Greek New Testament*, 186.

involving all of life, and Paul is correct in describing it as his exclusive sphere of existence before his conversion.⁶³

Paul understood his way of life as flowing directly and necessarily from his religious convictions and values. Because of this perspective, Paul insisted that one's conduct must change with conversion:

Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles [ἔθνη] do, in the futility of their minds. They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity. But that is not the way you learned Christ!—assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus, to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life [προτέραν ἀναστροφὴν] and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness (Eph 4:17-24).

Here Paul distinguishes between behavior of the ἔθνη and the behavior of Christ-followers. He notes that their values (“futility of their minds,” “darkened understanding,” “alienation from the life of God,” “ignorance,” and “hardness of heart”) lead to sinful behavior (“sensuality,” “greed,” and “impurity”). He describes this once again as their “former manner of life,” using the term ἀναστροφή. In contrast, the new values of Christians (“renewed in the spirit of your minds”) produce a new way of life (“put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness”). Paul communicates a similar sentiment to Timothy when he says, “Set the believers an example in speech, in conduct [ἀναστροφῆ], in love, in faith, in purity” (1Ti 4:12). Paul clearly uses ἀναστροφή, therefore, to describe a particular way of life, whether good or evil, that flows from religious beliefs and values. Boice summarizes:

⁶³ Frank E. Gaebelin, ed., *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Volume 10: Romans Through Galatians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976), 433.

Paul now gives the content of the teaching his readers received, though the verb is not actually repeated. Their previous life style was to be discarded completely. They must forsake their old behavioral haunts (*anastrophēn*; NIV, “your former way of life”) and indeed lay aside the costume of their unregenerate selves.⁶⁴

The most prolific use of *ἀναστροφή* is found in Peter’s writings. Forms of the term appear three times in 1 Peter 1:13-19:

Therefore, preparing your minds for action, and being sober-minded, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct [*ἀναστροφῆ*], since it is written, “You shall be holy, for I am holy.” And if you call on him as Father who judges impartially according to each one’s deeds [*ἔργον*], conduct yourselves [*ἀναστράφητε*] with fear throughout the time of your exile, knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways [*μυταίιας ἀναστροφῆς*] inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot.

Like Paul, Peter contrasts a former way of life with a new behavior. Howe says of Peter’s use of *ἀναστροφή*, “The word “behavior,” which translates *ἀναστροφῆ*, corresponds to the word “lifestyle” and covers all actions, thoughts, words, and relationships.”⁶⁵ Peter characterizes the former behavior as flowing from ignorance, leading to “futile ways inherited from your forefathers.” The new way is to be characterized by holiness and fear. Here Peter uses the verb form of *ἀναστροφή*, *ἀναστρέφω* (*anastrephō*), to command his readers to live a certain way since they have been ransomed from the former way. Peter also uses a nearly synonymous “behavior”-related term, *ἔργον* (*ergon*; “deeds”), to describe their lifestyle.

⁶⁴ Frank E. Gaebelin, ed., *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Volume 11: Ephesians Through Philemon* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), 62.

⁶⁵ Frederic R. Howe, “The Christian Life in Peter’s Theology,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 157, no. 627 (July 2000): 306–07.

Later in 1 Peter 2:12 Peter admonishes his readers, “Keep your conduct [ἀναστροφὴν] among the Gentiles [ἔθνεσιν] honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds [καλῶν ἔργων] and glorify God on the day of visitation.” Notably, this command is in the context of Peter using race-related terms to call believers in Christ a “chosen race [γένος],” “a holy nation [ἔθνος],” and “a people [λαός] for his own possession.” This, then, reveals a connection between the race-related terms and the “behavior”-related terms. Γένος, ἔθνος, and λαός identify groups of people who unite around common ἀναστροφή. This common behavior stems from shared values and beliefs. Christians, according to Peter, are a new race that shares common values and beliefs, which result in a new way of life. This way of life is distinct from their former behavior, the conduct of unbelievers. Indeed, the metaphorical use of ἔθνος in several passages, including 1 Peter 2:9, indicates that the Christian community forms a new “nation” distinct from earthly nations. David Wright explains the significance of the race-related terms in 1 Peter 2:

Each of these four designations is pregnant with suggestiveness of its own, but they all express the important early Christian conviction that Christians in any one place or region belonged to a people, the people of God, which constituted a new corporate presence. This self-consciousness became a significant feature of the remarkable confidence of the Christians in the first three centuries.⁶⁶

Wright argues that the early church saw itself as a “third race,” distinct from other earthly races, and thus they rejected the behavior of those races.

1 Peter 2:12 also reveals another important aspect of a believer’s conduct—it has potential evangelistic impact upon unbelievers: “They may see your good deeds and

⁶⁶ David F. Wright, “A Race Apart? Jews, Gentiles, Christians,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 160, no. 368 (April 2003): 128.

glorify God on the day of visitation.” Peter reiterates this emphasis in 1 Peter 3:1-2:

“Likewise, wives, be subject to your own husbands, so that even if some do not obey the word, they may be won without a word by the conduct [*ἀναστροφῆς*] of their wives, when they see your respectful and pure conduct [*ἀναστροφῆν*].” Also important to note is that Peter describes this “pure conduct” in terms of particular ways of adorning themselves in jewelry and dress (vv 3-6). Finally, Peter further describes the importance of a believer’s way of life for its evangelistic impact in 1 Peter 3:15-16:

But in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior [*ἀναστροφῆν*] in Christ may be put to shame.

“Culture” in the New Testament

From this study of NT terms, it is apparent that the group of terms most closely resembling both cultural anthropologists’ and missional authors’ definitions of “culture” is the “behavior”-related terms. While both the “race”-related and “world”-related terms demonstrate relationship to the contemporary notion of culture, they do not identify culture itself. Ethnic groups unite around common culture, and the sinful world-system affects unbelieving culture, but these terms are not the same as culture. Rather, “behavior”-related terms like *ἀναστροφή*—which describe complete ways of life, conduct, and behavior—most closely identify “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, arts, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (Tylor)⁶⁷ or “the sum total of ways of living

⁶⁷ Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, 1.

built up by a human community and transmitted from one generation to another”
(Newbigin).⁶⁸

“Contextualization” in the New Testament

As noted above, the missional philosophy of contextualization depends heavily upon their adaption of the anthropological definition of culture. Thus defining culture biblically as “behavior” or “way of life” already reorients the idea of contextualization. However, a brief analysis of the key passages cited as examples of biblical contextualization will further clarify whether such comparisons are valid. Missional proponents identify two passages primarily as examples of NT contextualization.

Mars Hill. Missional exponents often cite Paul’s sermon on Mars Hill in Acts 17:16-34 as the supreme example of missional contextualization, so much so that Mark Driscoll even named his church “Mars Hill”:

When the apostle Paul stood atop Mars Hill, he proclaimed good news to a diverse people steeped in philosophy, culture, and spirituality. Mars Hill Church seeks to continue that legacy in modern-day Seattle. Our city is a place much like first-century Athens: a marketplace of ideas, a vibrant arts community, and a metropolitan hub.

Our church is more than a building, an organization, a man, or a Sunday. Mars Hill Church is a group of missionaries united by a common relationship with Jesus Christ. We want to share him with Seattle by serving and loving the city and preaching the gospel like Paul: using the artifacts and language of our culture to point to Jesus.⁶⁹

Paul’s engaging of the culture of Athens in his attempt to win them to Christ serves as a model for missional churches. Stetzer and Putman say of this passage, “The culture of the

⁶⁸ Newbigin, *The Other Side of 1984*, 5.

⁶⁹ <http://www.marshillchurch.org/newwhere>, accessed February 15, 2008.

hearer impacted his missional methods,”⁷⁰ and Van Gelder notes that “Paul argued philosophy with secular philosophy on secular terms.”⁷¹

Acts 17 records Paul’s attempt to evangelize three cities, each of which has very different kinds of people. Paul’s audience in Thessalonica was predominantly Jewish. He spent time in the synagogue there speaking to Jews and Jewish proselytes, but it was not in any way a predominantly receptive audience. In fact, this was actually mostly a hostile audience. Some did come to Christ, but for the most part, Paul’s audience was hostile. Verse 5 records that these Jews were jealous when a few began to convert to Christ, and so they stirred up the crowd against Paul. In Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians he says that they received the gospel amid affliction (1.6). In his second letter he reminded them that they accepted his message amid much conflict (2.2). So evidently the few who did come to Christ did so amid much persecution. Paul’s audience in Thessalonica, for the most part, was comprised of hostile Jews.

He had a different audience in Berea, however. Again, his audience was mostly Jews, but these Jews were not hostile to his message. Verse 11 states that they were more noble than the Thessalonians because they received Paul’s message with eagerness, so this audience was similar to the one in Thessalonica except that they were much more receptive.

After Berea, Paul went to Athens. His audience here was much different than the other two cities. Athens was the center of Greek mythology, which in verse 16 Paul

⁷⁰ Stetzer and Putman, *Breaking the Missional Code*, 183.

⁷¹ Craig Van Gelder, *The Missional Church and Leadership Formation: Helping Congregations Develop Leadership Capacity* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 2009), 118.

noticed when he saw that the city was full of idols.⁷² Furthermore, this city was full of high class, intellectual philosophers, exemplified by whom Paul meets in verse 18, a group of Epicureans and Stoics. Epicureans were pure materialists who did not believe in the spiritual world, similar to secular humanists today. Stoics were pantheists. Not only did they believe in many gods, but they also believed that all people have divinity within them, very similar to modern New Age beliefs.⁷³ So this was a completely different kind of audience than the audiences that Paul had found in Thessalonica and Berea. These were mostly Gentile pagans who were upper class, intellectual philosophers.

Thus Acts 17 records Paul's attempt to communicate the gospel to these three very different audiences. The question is whether Paul contextualized the message depending on the culture he was in. Verse 2 says that he reasoned with the Jews in Thessalonica from the Old Testament Scriptures. These Jews would have respected the Scriptures as inspired by God, and so it was natural for Paul to start there. Verse 3 records that he explained those Scriptures to them and proved that the Messiah had to die and rise again, and then he explained to them that the facts about Jesus of Nazareth fit with these prophecies about the Messiah. The proper response, then, would be to believe in Jesus Christ. Paul was able to assume a lot with these Jews, he could leave some things unsaid, and he reasoned from Old Testament prophecies. His method was evidently very similar with the Berean Jews.

⁷² Mal Couch, *A Bible Handbook to the Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2004), 338–39.

⁷³ John B Polhill, *Acts (New American Commentary)* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 1992), 336–37.

His method differed slightly with the audience in Athens. In some ways he had to say more to them than he did to the Jews. He had to tell them that God created all things and ruled all things, that God expected them to serve Him, and that judgment was coming for those who did not serve Him. The Jews already knew all that, but he had to explain these things to the Athenians because, as he said, they were ignorant. In Athens, Paul did not reason with them out of the Old Testament prophecies, trying to prove to them that predictions about the Messiah and facts about Jesus's life matched, which would have made no sense to them. Instead, he appealed to the needs he knew the Athenians had and showed them why they needed to turn to God.

So in this sense, Paul presented the same gospel message in slightly different ways depending on his audience. Paul communicated the gospel in two primary ways that were different for the pagan intellectuals than he did for the Jews in Thessalonica and Berea. The first way Paul communicated the gospel differently was with relation to their religion. With the Jews in Thessalonica and Berea, Paul was able to build upon the foundation of their current religion and explain new revelation concerning Jesus. He could not do that with pagans since they had a completely different understanding of the nature of the world, and so Paul had to consider their current religious understanding and then explain what was necessary to correct their faulty thinking. He does this in verses 22-23:

So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: "Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, 'To the unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.

Paul had evidently spent some time studying the religion of Athens, and he used that knowledge to present the gospel in the best way possible, but what Paul thought about

this religious culture is enlightening. Verse 16 says that Paul was “provoked” (*παροξύνω*) by the culture he saw in Athens.⁷⁴ He did not adopt their culture; he did not approve of their culture; he despised it. Furthermore, Paul did not try to garner respect by speaking positively about their beliefs. In verse 22 when he says that they are “religious,” he is not complimenting them, contrary to some interpretations.⁷⁵ The word here is *δεισιδαίμων* (*deisidaimōn*), literally “superstitious,” which would have been considered a negative charge.⁷⁶ Some scholars suggest that the term is neutral;⁷⁷ however, Paul’s other use in Romans 1:20-23 is a decidedly negative tone and communicates spiritual ignorance.⁷⁸ This is reflected further in verse 23 where Paul references their “unknown” god. Again, some missional advocates suggest that Paul was seeking to gain common

⁷⁴ cf. John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts: The Spirit, the Church, and the World (Bible Speaks Today)*, Reprint. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 278.

⁷⁵ Lewis Foster, *NIV Study Bible*, p. 1680; NASB Study Bible, p. 1608; Jason Q. VonEhrenkrook, “A Rhetorical Analysis of the Aeropagus Address and its Missiological Implications,” *Calvary Baptist Theological Journal* 14.2 (Fall 1998).

⁷⁶ David Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 2009), 494. “Paul’s reaction to the idolatry of the city in v. 16 suggests that the whole expression *os deisidaimonesterous* (v. 22) should be understood negatively, but given an ironic sense (‘I see that you make a great display of piety’).” cf. Polhill, *Acts*, 371.

⁷⁷ See, for example, Lynn Allan Losie, “Paul’s Speech on the Areopagus: A Model of Cross-cultural Evangelism,” in *Mission in Acts: ancient narratives in contemporary context*, ed. Robert L. Gallagher and Paul Hertig (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 228–29. “The first impression of this speech is that it appears to be designed to criticize the audience. . . . But this impression does not take into account the rhetorical strategy of a deliberative speech, in which it would not be in the best interest of the speaker to offend his audience. We have seen above that the Epicurean philosophers, if they were part of Paul’s audience, would not be insulted by a characterization of Greek religion as superstition, and thus Paul might be using this apparently critical observation as means of establishing the good will of his audience, as he does in the introduction to his speech in the synagogue of Antioch in Pisidia. But since Paul’s audience is likely to have included Stoics, who did have a respect for religious piety, he is probably capturing their attention in a less sarcastic way by introducing a topic, with which they would be familiar, on the misguided religiosity of the common people.”

⁷⁸ Darrell L. Bock, *Acts* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 564.

ground with his audience.⁷⁹ However, Paul’s use of the term *ἀγνοέω* (*agnoeō*) here again connotes a negative charge of ignorance. The NASB is perhaps the clearest translation here: “What therefore you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you.”⁸⁰ Even the phrase “objects of your worship” is used elsewhere in Scripture only negatively.⁸¹ Paul was accusing them of being ignorant in their religious beliefs. In fact, he implies their ignorance again in verse 30 and says that God commands them to repent of it.

The second way in which Paul communicated the gospel was with reference to their philosophy. In verse 28, Paul quotes their own philosophers: “For ‘In him we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we are indeed his offspring.’” Some missional advocates insist that this is an example of Paul immersing himself in the culture of Athens and quoting their own philosophers as a way to gain respect from his audience.⁸² However, careful consideration of Paul’s argument here clarifies the issue. His primary argument begins in verse 24:

The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their

⁷⁹ Losie, “Paul’s Speech on the Areopagus,” 229–30.

⁸⁰ Polhill, *Acts*, 372; R. Kent Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1996), 233.

⁸¹ cf. 2 Thessalonians 2:4 and Romans 1:25.

⁸² See Simon J. Kistemaker, *Acts*, in his *New Testament Commentaries* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), pp. 636-37; Richard N. Longnecker, *Acts*, EBC, revised ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007): 10.984.

dwelling place, that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us.

Paul's argument is that God is the Creator and Ruler of all and that he is not served by human hands. Then he quotes their own philosophers who admit that they come from a god, which reveals their inconsistency. They say that they came from a god, and yet they still try to bring that god under their control by making idols. Paul is attempting to discredit them by pointing out this glaring inconsistency in their thinking. He reveals that purpose in verse 29:

Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man.

Paul was not using cultural references in a positive light; again, he was showing how futile they were. He was discrediting the popular religious philosophy of the day.

Paul did communicate the message of the gospel differently to pagans than he did to Jews. However, the difference involved the fact that he could build upon the truth of the Jewish religion, while his attitude toward the religion of the pagans was one of disgust and condemnation. He did not immerse himself in their "culture" in order to reach them; rather, he exploited the ignorance and superstition of their religion in order to confront them with the truths of the gospel.

All Things to All Men. Missional experts also appeal to 1 Corinthians 9:19-23 as an example of cultural contextualization:

For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I

have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.

Stetzer and Putman say of this passage, “Paul is the model for us in that he made himself a slave to the preferences and culture of others, rather than a slave to his own preferences.”⁸³ Parris comments, “Paul held deep personal convictions, yet he searched for customs and traditions with which he could sympathize in order to place himself in the position to win them to Christ.”⁸⁴

This passage must be understood in its larger context of a discussion about meat that had been offered to idols in 1 Corinthians 8-10. Paul argues in chapter 8 that the meat itself is good, but for several reasons expounded in the subsequent chapters, Paul suggests that in some circumstances Christians may be wisest to refrain from eating. If the meat is so strongly identified with the idol worship that it causes weaker Christians to stumble into sin, then the stronger Christian should not eat the meat (8:13). In Chapter 9, Paul reinforces his point by listing other rights that he would be willing to forego for the sake of the gospel. For Paul, unhindered communication of the gospel motivates him to forsake what are legitimately his rights (9:18).

In this context Paul makes his famous “all things to all men” statement.

Missional advocates understand this to be a positive statement of adopting the culture of a

⁸³ Stetzer and Putman, *Breaking the Missional Code*, 52.

⁸⁴ Stanley Glenn Parris, “Instituting a Missional Worship Style in a Local Church Developed from an Analysis of the Culture” (PhD diss., Asbury Theological Seminary, 2008), 28. Other missional books that use this passage include Alan J. Roxburgh and M. Scott Boren, *Introducing the Missional Church: What It Is, Why It Matters, How to Become One* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2009), 85; J. D. Payne, *Missional House Churches: Reaching Our Communities with the Gospel* (Biblica, 2008), 110; Alvin Reid and Thom S. Rainer, *Evangelism Handbook: Biblical, Spiritual, Intentional, Missional* (B&H Publishing Group, 2009), 311; Ed Stetzer and Philip Nation, *Compelled by Love: The Most Excellent Way to Missional Living* (Birmingham, AL: New Hope Publishers, 2008), 125.

target audience in order to reach them for the gospel. However, the context of the argument proves differently. Paul is not suggesting that the evangelist adopt cultural practices in order to engage his audience; rather, he is insisting that the evangelist be willing to eliminate practices that may be within his rights if such practices will hinder the advancement of the gospel. This is John Makujina's argument. "Contextualization" in this sense, according to Makujina, should be "preventative and defensive" rather than "offensive."⁸⁵ Paul is not attempting to create a "persuasive advantage with his hearers when the gospel is presented"; rather, he removes barriers to the gospel in order to create a "zero, neutral ground from which he may preach Christ crucified."⁸⁶

Even if the missional philosophy of contextualization is based on an anthropological understanding of culture, their idea of contextualization cannot be proven from the passages discussed above. Adjusting methods of communicating the gospel based on religious differences or removing legitimate practices that would hinder the gospel are not the same as the contemporary evangelical notion of contextualization that involves immersing one's self in the cultural practices of a target audience in order to gain a hearing for the gospel.

Conclusion

If there is any concept of the anthropological/missional idea of "culture" in the NT, it is the idea of "way of life." A people's culture is their behavior and their conduct. Several important implications may be drawn from this analysis. First, NT authors

⁸⁵ John Makujina, *Measuring the Music: Another Look at the Contemporary Christian Music Debate*, Second Edition. (Old Paths Publications, 2002), 20.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 22–23.

explain cultural differences between various people groups as differences of belief and value. They highlight differences of belief and religion that produce the behavior and conduct of a people. This is important because it contradicts the idea of cultural neutrality. Since values and beliefs are not neutral (i.e., they can be either good or evil), the culture produced from values and beliefs is likewise not neutral. Furthermore, this also contradicts the notion that religion is a component of culture. Rather, culture is a component of religion. So while “behavior”-related terms resemble anthropological/missional definitions of culture, the use of such terms in the NT should reorient the missional understanding of culture such that it is seen as flowing from religious values and worldview. Thus every culture and particular cultural expression must be evaluated based upon what religious values it embodies.

Second, NT authors identify people groups (ethnicities, tribes, nations, etc.) as those who share common culture flowing from common values. They do not think about “culture” per se; rather, they think about behavior, and they believe that the gospel changes behavior—it changes a person’s culture. Since culture is a component of religion, where religion changes, so changes culture. This creates a reorientation of race for Christians; since a race is a group that unites around common values and practices, Christians will find themselves increasingly alienated from the race into which they were born and drawn into a new race united around biblical values.

Third, NT authors demand that the culture of Christians be holy, pure, and distinct from the culture of unbelievers. Rather than understanding culture to be neutral, NT authors judge unbelieving culture as worthy of condemnation. They expect Christians, therefore, to reject the culture shaped by the world’s systems and to form a

new way of life impacted by biblical values. The culture produced from unbelief is not neutral; it is depraved: “The challenge to this assumption is that cultural neutrality is a myth and culture is hostile toward God; just as man is individually depraved in microcosm, so also culture is corporately depraved in macrocosm.”⁸⁷

Fourth, NT authors proclaim Christianity as a new and distinct people group that shares new values and thus new culture. Peter in particular identifies Christianity as a “chosen race,” a “holy nation,” and a “people for his own possession” distinct from other races, nations, and peoples. Howe summarizes the important relationship between “race”-related and “behavior”-related terms in Peter’s writing:

The word *ἀναστροφῆς*, “way of life,” is a key word in Petrine theology, for it occurs eight times in Peter’s epistles (1 Pet. 1:15; 18; 2:12; 3:1, 2, 16; 2 Pet. 2:7; 3:11). The contrast of lifestyles of believers before and after they trusted Christ as their Redeemer is vividly displayed by seeing how the same word is used to describe their former way of life (“your futile way of life [*ἀναστροφῆς*],” 1:18) and their new life in Christ (“be holy yourselves also in all your behavior” [*ἀναστροφῆς*],” 1:15).

This contrast serves as evidence that Peter sought to relate the theological significance of the death of Christ to the ethical dimension of the lives of those who trusted His finished work for their salvation.⁸⁸

Fifth, NT authors insist that a clear distinction between the culture of believers and unbelievers will have evangelistic impact. Missional authors argue that in order to reach the culture, believers must be incarnate in the culture, e.g., they must resemble the culture around them. Unbelievers will be evangelized only as they recognize the cultural presentation of the gospel. Their posture of contextualization flows directly from their understanding of culture as something entirely involuntary and neutral. Evangelism

⁸⁷ Snoeberger, “Noetic Sin, Neutrality, and Contextualization,” 357.

⁸⁸ Howe, “The Christian Life in Peter’s Theology,” 194.

cannot occur, they argue, without cultural contextualization. In contrast, NT authors insist that only when the culture of believers changes as a result of changed values will unbelievers “glorify God on the day of visitation.” Snoeberger explains this more biblical approach to evangelizing the culture: “The proper response of the Christian to culture is to expose its depravity, demonstrate that it has illicitly borrowed from the Christian worldview, and show that its adherents cannot live within the implications of their own worldview.”⁸⁹

Snoeberger’s comments lead to one final conclusion that must be drawn as a result of synthesizing what the NT authors have to say about pagan and Christian culture: where similarities do exist between the behavior of unbelievers and the conduct of believers, such behavior by unbelievers is due to the fact that on that particular issue they are borrowing from the Christian worldview. Snoeberger explains:

Some cultures borrow substantially from the Christian worldview (sometimes consciously and deliberately, but more often in subconscious response to the latent influence of common grace that envelopes all of God’s creation) and others do not, and this factor is singularly vital in determining how a Christian is to relate to culture.⁹⁰

This reality explains why the culture of Christians may at times resemble the culture of unbelievers in some respects. However, this understanding also sets the believer’s initial response toward unbelieving culture as one of suspicion until he can determine which aspects reveal a borrowing from Christian values. Furthermore, when

⁸⁹ Snoeberger, “Noetic Sin, Neutrality, and Contextualization,” 357.

⁹⁰ Mark A. Snoeberger, “D. A. Caron’s Christ and Culture Revisited: A Reflection and a Response,” *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 13 (2008): 100.

certain aspects of unbelieving culture and Christian culture resemble one another, it is because the unbelievers look like Christians in those instances, not the other way around.

Christians in the twenty-first century will not be able to escape wrestling through matters of culture and contextualization as they seek to accomplish the mission God has for them. Yet rather than adopting the understanding of culture developed by secular anthropologists, Christians must be willing to reorient that understanding to fit within the biblical categories of behavior and conduct, applying all that the Scripture has to say about those categories to cultural matters. Only then will they be equipped to appropriate a truly biblical perspective on culture and contextualization for world evangelism, worship, and the entirety of church ministry.

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