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A THEOLOGICAL JUSTIFICATION FOR  
THE CONTRIBUTION OF CULTURE  
TO THE THEOLOGICAL TASK

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A Dissertation  
Presented to  
the Faculty of  
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

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In Partial Fulfillment  
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Doctor of Philosophy

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by  
James Michael Risner  
May 2013

**APPROVAL SHEET**

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THE CONTRIBUTION OF CULTURE  
TO THE THEOLOGICAL TASK

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To Jenny, my loving wife, partner in gospel ministry  
and ever-helpful companion

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## PREFACE

The dynamic relationship between theology and culture has come to my attention via a winding and wonder-filled path. My childhood was upheld by the twin pillars of a strong commitment to the authority and sufficiency of the Bible and a profound desire to live a holy and separate life before God. This latter desire resulted in a profuse and mildly indiscriminate rejection of secular culture, as well as Christian art and music that reflected secular influence. Secular heavy metal group Metallica was bad, but Christian heavy metal group Stryper was perhaps just as bad. “Secular culture” was a shibboleth of which we did not speak. Evangelicalism grieved me similarly as David Wells: “Evangelicalism is guilty of displaying a disposition to adapt to culture rather than to sustain a moral and spiritual antagonism to it.”<sup>1</sup> When Wells wrote his article “No Place for Truth” in 1998, I was the poster-boy for H. Richard Niebuhr’s taxonomic description “Christ against culture.”<sup>2</sup> This foray began as a personal ethical challenge but eventually morphed into a theological and apologetic challenge that narrowed down to this still-broad question: what is the epistemological common ground between the secular world and God’s people, in light of God’s revelatory gifts to both?

The wrestling match between me and Christ and culture has intensified in recent years, particularly with regard to the relationship between culture and theology. Though the foundational mooring of Scripture still grounds my epistemological structure, theological truths about human existence and meaningful interaction with the world have

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<sup>1</sup>David Wells, “Introduction: The Word in the World,” in *The Compromised Church: The Present Evangelical Crisis*, ed. John H. Armstrong (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1998), 24.

<sup>2</sup>H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (Chicago: Harper One, 1956).

softened my previous scowl toward unchristian culture of any stripe. Particularly, when I have been challenged with the biblical and systematic study of the doctrines of *imago dei*, common grace and general revelation—all of which, I have discovered, are God’s gifts given to even the most secular of individuals—my frowning face yielded a faint smile.

Thus, this challenge of the relationship between theology and culture developed into an ever-refining question: if all people of all time represent God by bearing his image, are empowered by God in a way that restrains sin and gifts all people, and are equipped with certain truth-content about God and the world, then would not the collective voice of humanity at least partially speak truth? My interest in this subject has grown out of the soil of my commitment to live for Christ, taking firm root as a worthwhile endeavor in my college years and flowering into an academic pursuit in my theological studies at SBTS.

I am grateful to many, especially to those who have been of utmost significance in my spiritual formation. Of particular note are my dad and mom, who raised me diligently in the fear and admonition of the Lord. My church, Kings Baptist Church, has supported me tremendously by praying for me and granting me time to write. Thank you, Dr. Toby Jennings, for helping me to navigate the intimidating Style Guide and for gifting me with countless hours of editing. Thank you, Dr. Mark T. Coppenger for your infectious cultural apologetic, for stirring my soul to winsomely defend the faith. Thank you, Dr. Stephen J. Wellum, for your meticulous attention to theological methodology grounded in Scripture that has propelled forward my academic pursuit in a spirit of theological precision and excellence. Thank you, Dr. Chad Owen Brand, for your robust scholarship, personality, and pastoral skills that have invigorated my heart to bring theology to bear in all of life. To these men, in particular, I owe a great debt. My academic pursuits under the tutelage of these great persons would not be possible if not for God’s instrument, Dr. R. Albert Mohler, Jr., and God’s gracious gift of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.



Finally, thank you to my family, Jenny, Elijah and Josiah, and my soon to be daughter, Eliana; Keith and Debby; Joe and his six girls; Josh and Rachel and their seven children; Jonathan and his daughter; Joy and Garrett; Johanna and Kurtis and their two girls; and Julia and Jameson.

James Risner

Louisville, Kentucky

May 2013

## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

### **Introduction**

Human experience is inherently a spiritual experience for all people regardless of religious affiliation, socio-economic status, race or any other division. George Barna acknowledges this reality when he reports that twenty percent of Americans turn to “media, arts and culture” as their primary means of spiritual experience.<sup>1</sup> This turning of many Americans to culture as their primary means of spiritual experience is not only evident in polling data, but is also commonly expressed in the medium of popular culture itself.<sup>2</sup> For example, in *All New People*, character Nanny Goodman speaks about her parents’ experience: “Now my father didn’t believe in God, but he believed in the existence of the sacred, of the holy; it was pretty hard not to believe in anything in the face of Bach, or our mountain. . . . My mother believed that God lit the stars and spoke directly through family and friends, musicians and writers, madmen and children, and nature—and not, as she had been raised to believe, through a booming voice from the heavens.”<sup>3</sup> The experience of Goodman’s parents is illustrative of many others reporting experiences of divine transcendence that pervade the human experience. Others speak of culture providing “supernatural shudders.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>George Barna, *Revolution!* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 2005), 48-49.

<sup>2</sup>I am indebted to Robert K. Johnston for his research on these illustrations in “Discerning the Spirit in Culture: Observations Arising from Reflections on General Revelation,” *Ex Auditu* 23 (2007): 53.

<sup>3</sup>Anne Lamott, *All New People* (Washington, DC: Counterpoint, 1989), 29, 37.

<sup>4</sup>*Fanny and Alexander*, directed by Ingmar Bergman, 1982.

Robert Johnston writes of Albert Einstein going to a concert early in the career of the violinist Yehudi Menuhin.<sup>5</sup> After the concert Einstein said to the musician, “Thank you, Mr. Menuhin; you have again proved to me that there is a God in heaven.” Narrator Richard Viladesau concludes: “Aesthetic experience seems to play a major role—at least for some people—in the exercise of the practical judgment for belief in God—perhaps a great deal more than the traditional ‘proofs’ of God’s existence set forth in apologetic theology.”<sup>6</sup> A report by David Hay and Kate Hunt affirms the spiritual experiences even of the non-churched culture. In 2000, though less than ten percent of those polled in the United Kingdom attended church, “seventy-six percent reported having a spiritual experience of some kind.”<sup>7</sup> Simply put, human experience is spiritual, and culture reflects that spirituality.<sup>8</sup>

Some even attribute great shaping power to culture, suggesting that “pop culture has emerged as a potent shaper of the fundamental convictions of North American society, rivaling, if not surpassing, the church itself.”<sup>9</sup> Most anthropologists and theologians disagree as to the direction and quality of this spiritual experience and influence, but most agree with the idea that the nature of human culture is intrinsically spiritual and influential.

This spiritual nature of the human experience in culture has motivated some scholars to investigate the intersection between culture and theology in order to isolate

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<sup>5</sup>Johnston, “Discerning the Spirit in Culture,” 53.

<sup>6</sup>Richard Viladesau, *Theological Aesthetics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 104.

<sup>7</sup>David Hay and Kate Hunt, “Understanding the Spirituality of People Who Don’t Go to Church: A Report on the Findings of the Adults,” Project at the University of Nottingham, quoted in Johnston, “Discerning the Spirit in Culture,” 53.

<sup>8</sup>Ted Turnau has suggested, “Whatever else it is, popular culture *is* religious; it *is* a type of worship, even when it doesn’t seem to be so.” Theodore Turnau, *Popologetics* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2012), 51.

<sup>9</sup>Stanley J. Grenz and John R. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 130.

specifically the religious role that culture plays, namely that culture gives particular groups of people a meaningful system of values and beliefs. Structured, ritualized activities reinforce ideals and virtues. For some, Star Trek conventions, dieting meetings or trips to the cinema function in place of religious practices such as prayer and corporate worship, as in the illustrations above.

This investigation of the intersection between theology and culture is merited by the inescapability of both. Because culture is intrinsically spiritual and inherently intertwined with human experience, the pastor-theologian should study it. Furthermore, humanity cannot help but express her understanding of God in cultural form. Culture has been compared to the air we breathe, being an inescapable component of a network of presuppositions that characterize the religious and epistemological structure of human beings. Dismissing or avoiding culture or theology is an exercise in self-deception. This self-deception is dangerous because of the shaping power that culture wields.<sup>10</sup> Despite culture's inseparable relationship with the human religious experience, its meaning is often dismissed by evangelicals.<sup>11</sup> Theodore Turnau argues that whereas secularists suppress meaning in popular culture, evangelicals wrongly dismiss meaning from popular cultural discourse.<sup>12</sup>

Likely, many evangelicals dismiss the study of theology and culture because too close an association with culture has been bad for a healthy progression of

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<sup>10</sup>The theologian cannot “simply ignore the culture in which we find ourselves, as that invariably results in an unthinking acceptance of the status quo.” Brian M. Howell and Jenell Williams Paris, *Introducing Cultural Anthropology: A Christian Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 41.

<sup>11</sup>John Leith pointedly draws attention to this critique of those in the Reformed tradition. “It has been easy to denigrate the Reformed tradition as culturally sterile.” John H. Leith, *Introduction to the Reformed Tradition*, rev. ed. (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981), 198. Brian Godawa calls people who reject culture automatically *cultural anorexics*; these people are stunting their own humanity. Brian Godawa, *Hollywood Worldviews: Watching Films with Wisdom and Discernment* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 13-14.

<sup>12</sup>Theodore A. Turnau III, “Reflecting Theologically on Popular Culture as Meaningful: The Role of Sin, Grace and General Revelation,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 37 (2002): 282-86.

sanctification.<sup>13</sup> But if culture were to be proven to be bad for one's health, should it still merit our attention? Theodore Turnau suggests that it should. "Whether or not popular culture is aesthetically good for you, it is where most of the people in our culture live. Therefore, it deserves a hearing, whether we find it aesthetically worthy or not."<sup>14</sup> Culture deserves a hearing because it reflects and shapes. The theologian who would harness culture's power to reveal and influence must devote himself to its study. Gordon Lynch rightly warns that studying everyday life risks descending into the trivial and the banal.<sup>15</sup> The student of theology and culture is not simply on a field trip from the rigors of academic study, nor is he on a scavenger hunt designed to bring back booty of anecdotal souvenirs. In the stream of a rigorous intellectual tradition he is working to make sense of the glory-charged world in which he lives, embracing the promises and confronting the perils of such an enterprise.

In brief, what are the promises and perils of this study? The promise that this study affords is that because culture is the fabric of existence, as we learn better the presuppositions that contribute to the nature of this fabric, we will learn better where we speak rightly and wrongly of God and be better equipped to engage the world with the truth. J. Gresham Machen exhorted the church, "Shut yourself up in an intellectual monastery, do not disturb yourself with the thoughts of unregenerate men, and of course you will find it *easier* to be a Christian, just as it is easier to be a good soldier in comfortable winter quarters than it is on the field of battle."<sup>16</sup> On the field of battle, the theologian who studies culture affords to the church the potential to reveal the seemingly

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<sup>13</sup>Gordon Lynch, *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), 69-92.

<sup>14</sup>Turnau, "Reflecting Theologically on Popular Culture as Meaningful," 270.

<sup>15</sup>Lynch, *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture*, 17.

<sup>16</sup>J. Gresham Machen, "Christianity and Culture," in *Mars Hill Monographs* (Charlottesville, VA: Mars Hill Audio, n.d.), 7.

innocuous cultural forms that threaten to undermine our understanding of truth and the right worship of God. John Leith encourages us with this thought.

The theologian of the church is under obligation to test theological statements by the rubrics of a particular community in a way that the artist is not. Any effort to compel cultural life to conform to a particular tradition would stifle freedom and creativity and at best produce propaganda. Hence cultural expressions of the faith are “less pure” than expressions of the faith within the confines of the church’s life, such as worship, church polity, and theology. Nevertheless, there are cultural achievements in literature, visual arts, architecture, economics, and political life that do in significant measure embody the Christian faith. These cultural expressions of the faith tell us something about the faith.<sup>17</sup>

The theologian who rightly studies culture pinpoints the lies that defile the grains of truth and is better prepared than before to uphold the truth.

As the theologian discerns right and wrong theological expression in cultural form he harnesses the potential to deepen his knowledge and appreciation of God and the world. In short, if the church were to approach culture with a unified front, her witness would strengthen and worship would deepen.

The peril is that the church would compromise, allowing the contributions of culture to overshadow the objective supremacy of the Word in which God has chosen to reveal himself. The idea that creaturely means of communication can exhaustively describe God, reducing our understanding of him to nothing more than our own projections, is indeed a primary danger.<sup>18</sup> This danger could present itself easily if one reduced God’s Word to merely a product of human culture.

The promise and peril of the study of theology and culture were displayed in a recent intramural church controversy. In 2001 a battle raged in the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA). On paper, the battle was over the level of commitment that ministers must maintain to their confessional document, the Westminster Confession of Faith.

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<sup>17</sup>John H. Leith, *Introduction to the Reformed Tradition*, rev. ed. (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981), 200.

<sup>18</sup>D. Stephen Long, *Theology and Culture: A Guide to the Discussion* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2008), 4.

Strict subscriptionists contended with the system subscriptionists, that every jot and tittle must be ascribed to, or the church cannot be a body of faithful believers who are building healthy churches. System proponents argued that this contention only wasted time and energy that should be re-directed toward church planting.

Tim Keller argued that the standoff was not inherently over the Confession and the Bible, as a casual observation might suggest, but that it was over the way that the two sides view and treat culture. Because our time and place is not primarily Christian, a document that was drafted in the 1640s does not contain the relevant solutions for the issues we face today.<sup>19</sup> The sensitive relationship between the church and culture is certainly impactful. This relationship is not only an issue that the PCA denomination faces, but one that the so-called “emerging church” faces as well.<sup>20</sup> Steve Taylor connects this movement directly to the relationship between gospel and culture: “Gospel and culture lie at the core of the emerging church. Nearly every time I talk about the emerging church or alternative forms of worship, at some point I am asked if we are watering down the gospel. The question grows out of a concern that when the church engages culture, culture will take over. It asks us to make a choice: the gospel or culture.”<sup>21</sup> Many have contended that the church should reject this false dilemma of picking one or the other.

These calls for a balanced approach have not led to unity easily or quickly. The discussions continue. As T. M. Moore wrote, “No united front for responding to the

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<sup>19</sup>Jim Belcher, *Deep Church: A Third Way beyond Emerging and Traditional* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2009), 181-83.

<sup>20</sup>For an excellent introduction to the issues, see D. A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church: Understanding a Movement and Its Implications* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005). Also see Keving DeYoung and Ted Kluck, *Why We're Not Emergent: By Two Guys Who Should Be* (Chicago: Moody, 2008).

<sup>21</sup>Steve Taylor, *The Out of Bounds Church? Learning to Create a Community of Faith in a Culture of Change* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan/Youth Specialties, 2005), 138.

contemporary cultural situation with viable Christian alternatives” currently exists.<sup>22</sup> Some voices react against their narrow and fundamentalist upbringing, claiming that the sectarian spirit has led the traditional church to an inescapably irrelevant fortress mentality. Traditional churches fire back that “the emerging church has succumbed to the worst forms of syncretism, becoming indistinguishable from the postmodern world they say they want to reach.”<sup>23</sup> Some are fighting for a third way of consensus. Jim Belcher, for example, believes that the consensus on culture is of such importance that it is worthy of pursuit: “Parameters can be articulated and a variety of forums created to enable significant members of believers from all communions of the faithful to realize a common voice and stance toward the making and use of culture in all its forms.”<sup>24</sup> Belcher’s idealism is commendable and prompts the church forward in this conversation. In the spirit of moving the conversation forward, the promise this dissertation affords is the sharpening and unifying of the church on culture’s place in theological task.<sup>25</sup> This directly impacts missions and worship, preserving both the common ground and antithesis that characterizes the Christian’s relationship to culture.

Historically, Christians have varied widely on how they should or should not interact with culture. Christendom’s occasional belief in a human destiny that transcends

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<sup>22</sup>T. M. Moore, *Culture Matters: A Call for Consensus on Christian Cultural Engagement* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2007), 12.

<sup>23</sup>Jim Belcher, *Deep Church: A Third Way beyond Emerging and Traditional* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2009), 183.

<sup>24</sup>Moore, *Culture Matters*, 146.

<sup>25</sup>This dissertation adopts a broad definition of “the theological task” that accords with John Frame’s rendering: “Theology is the application of the Word of God by persons to all areas of life.” John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1987), 81. As this dissertation speaks to the theological task it is not concerned merely with knowing God in a formal or abstract sense, but with knowing God and his creation in such a way that the theologian applies the truth and is enriched in life as a result. As this dissertation approaches it, then, the theological task is the pursuit of knowing and applying truth to life. For a discussion of the theological task with cachet, see Gregory Alan Thornbury, “Prolegomena: Introduction to the Task of Theology,” in *A Theology for the Church*, ed. Daniel L. Akin (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2007): 2-70.



a literal, physical culture has led many Christians to oppose culture boldly. As far back as Tertullian, culture was viewed as a land of alluring idols to be avoided.<sup>26</sup> Shortly after Tertullian's time, Augustine softened the boundary between the church and the surrounding culture.<sup>27</sup> In more recent years, the sentiments of Charles Finney became acceptable: "I cannot believe that a person who has ever known the love of God can relish a secular novel. Let me visit your chamber, your parlor, or wherever you keep your books. What is here? Byron, Scott, Shakespeare and a host of triflers and blasphemers of God."<sup>28</sup> When this more recent outlook is paired with the current antagonism of Western culture toward Christian values and beliefs, many reciprocate the feelings of animosity, seeking relief from the intruding "vice" of culture.<sup>29</sup> This antagonism was characteristic of evangelical Christianity at least as recently as 1970,<sup>30</sup> when a shift began to give way to increased comfort and acceptance.<sup>31</sup> This recent paradigm shift has set the tone for a mostly positive contemporary view of culture.

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<sup>26</sup>Hence, Tertullian's famous quotation: "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?" Kelton Cobb summarizes Tertullian's impact: "We have inherited a view of culture and the church as discrete realities, in which the surrounding culture is essentially a great expanse of human activity riddled with idolatry that beckons as a sweet poison to the pious." Kelton Cobb, *The Blackwell Guide to Theology and Popular Culture* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), 75-87. Niebuhr classifies Tertullian as "one of the foremost illustrations of the anticultural movement to be found in the history of the church." Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 55.

<sup>27</sup>Cobb, *The Blackwell Guide to Theology and Popular Culture*, 83.

<sup>28</sup>Quoted in Os Guinness, *Fit Bodies, Fat Minds: Why Evangelicals Don't Think and What To Do about It* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 62.

<sup>29</sup>Culture often marginalizes religion to such a degree that it is treated as if it were another trivial hobby like building model airplanes; not something for intelligent adults. See Stephen L. Carter, *The Culture of Disbelief: How American Law and Politics Trivialize Religious Devotion* (New York: Anchor, 1993), 11.

<sup>30</sup>Carl McClain, *Morals and the Movies* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 1970), 17.

<sup>31</sup>Romanowski cites several Barna Research Group studies to show that "born again Christians" have bought into media technology just as much as anyone. There is no significant statistical difference between Christians and the general population, and evangelicals are among the most frequent moviegoers. MarketCast—a leading Hollywood marketing firm—discovered that religious and nonreligious people watch movies and television shows with equal frequency. William D. Romanowski, *Eyes Wide Open: Looking for God in Popular Culture* (Grand Rapids: BrazosPress, 2001), 39. Regarding

This positive shift has led many to readily embrace culture and not only welcome its contributions but employ its devices. Timothy B. Cargal, pastor and professor in the Washington, DC area, for example, believes that one of the most effective ways to connect with parishioners in sermons is through the use of movies.<sup>32</sup>

Craig Detweiler and Barry Taylor concentrate on what is right with pop culture; they seek out the presence of God by closely combing culture.<sup>33</sup> They may agree that this generation needs the voice of the living God, but not necessarily as the Spirit speaks through Scripture. They turn toward cultural exegesis as a source of religious truth because of the inability of the church to connect effectively with this generation.<sup>34</sup> In an attempt to reach this generation with the voice of God, Detweiler and Taylor “turn to pop culture in [their] efforts to understand God and to recognize the twenty-first-century face of Jesus. . . . We believe a bold, ancient, radical Christ stands on the sidelines of the culture wars, waiting (in the words of Creed) ‘With Arms Wide Open,’ eager to engage

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the integration of evangelicals into mainstream culture, Richard Lints concurs: “By the mid-1970’s it had become increasingly apparent that the evangelical empire had become sufficiently well established that it could no longer be considered a cultural outsider in any significant sense.” Richard Lints, *The Fabric of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 111.

<sup>32</sup>Timothy B. Cargal, *Hearing a Film, Seeing a Sermon* (Louisville: Westminster, 2007). Others, such as Efrem Smith and Phil Jackson, write about incorporating rap, break dancing, poetry, and disc jockeys into worship and preaching. In seeking to reach the next generation they believe we must speak the gospel in “their language” by “embracing their culture.” Efrem Smith and Phil Jackson, *The Hip-Hop Church: Connecting with the Movement Shaping Our Culture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity), 2006.

<sup>33</sup>Craig Detweiler and Barry Taylor, *A Matrix of Meanings: Finding God in Pop Culture* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 9. This debate surrounding contextualization primarily swings between two poles. David Wells notes, “In the one understanding of contextualization, the revelatory trajectory moves only from authoritative Word into contemporary culture; in the other, the trajectory moves both from text to context and from context to text.” See David Wells, “The Nature and Function of Theology,” in *The Use of the Bible as Theology: Evangelical Options*, ed. Robert K. Johnston (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1997), 195.

<sup>34</sup>John Drane calls this the “McDonaldization of the Church”: “stereo-typed structures [and] uninventive pre-packaged worship.” John Drane, *The McDonaldization of the Church: Spirituality, Creativity, and the Future of the Church* (London: Darnon, Longman and Todd, 2000).

our hearts, our minds, and our culture.”<sup>35</sup> This “engaging Christ” is speaking to the twenty-first century in a fresh new way, leading those who want to be engaged to turn to the “new text” or be turned away. “People of faith need to become conversant with the new canon, the new literacy, and join the new conversation. Only in this way can we hear Jesus afresh. Only in this way can the Spirit quicken our spirits. Only in this way can we allow God to be fully God.”<sup>36</sup>

The issue that Detweiler and Taylor fail to address adequately, however, is the authority of Scripture. What is their basis for claiming that Scripture is replaced by culture? An adequate exploration of theology and culture’s relationship must sufficiently account for Scripture’s claim to inspiration and authority.

If this brief introduction concerning Christians, theology, and culture reveals anything, it is that the discussion concerning the Christian and culture is crucially important, yet also multi-faceted and complex. The relationship of Christians to culture impacts the topics of sanctification, contextualization, apologetics, evangelism, theology, and more. Each of these topics is crucial, yet each topic merits much more attention than this dissertation can muster. The question that this dissertation answers is “how should the theologian view the truth-claims of non-Christian culture?” The primary concern of this dissertation is to engage this conversation as it pertains to the relationship between culture and the theological task, demonstrating that studying culture benefits the theologian in the theological task.

### **Thesis**

This dissertation will justify the contention that culture contributes to the theological task in a subsidiary way to Scripture. This dissertation will interact with two

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<sup>35</sup>Detweiler and Taylor, *A Matrix of Meanings*, 9.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., 23.

existing models of theology and culture, which respectively suggest that the theological task transcends and embraces culture. Consistent with the confessional evangelical tradition, this dissertation will argue for a third way, that theology should employ culture. The justification of this thesis rests on the contention that culture is inherently a theologically meaningful and valuable text for three reasons. (1) God designed for culture to be a meaning-crafting activity of image-bearers who image God in speech and act. (2) Post-Fall culture-producing image-bearers are equipped with truth content via general revelation. (3) Culture-producing image-bearers are empowered by common grace to resist the full effects of sin and to transmit truth-value via cultural text. The effects of sin relating to these three doctrines flow downstream to their expression in culture, directly correlating to the epistemological weaknesses of culture: the image of God is corrupted; general revelation is insufficient to save and distorted; common grace restrains and empowers but does not save. Thus, culture's theological contribution reflects a worldview orientation antithesis; its value is not eliminated though it is limited, and as such, merits ancillary employment in theological method.

### **Methodology**

This dissertation is a constructive and synthetic biblical and theological examination arguing for the contributive yet ancillary role of culture in our understanding of the theological task. This dissertation examines relevant biblical data because the Bible is inerrant, reliable, and authoritative. It will also employ a wide variety of additional resources, including that of secular cultural anthropologists, commentaries, monographs, and journal articles, many of which provide contemporary treatment of the epistemological relationship between theology and culture. It interacts with two existing theology-and-culture categories, so as to clarify the thesis for the reader.

Though this dissertation will seek to address comprehensively the topic at hand, it will be limited in scope. It will not provide a sufficient critique of the theological

methodology of its dialogue partners. Rather, it will rely on existing critiques and engage the various paradigms in a way that clarifies the contention of this dissertation. In addition, a comprehensive definition of culture, and an analysis of common grace, *imago Dei* and general revelation is beyond its ability. Rather, it will develop a concise and clear explication of culture and of each doctrine in a way that contributes to building consensus on the topic at hand so as to demonstrate the thesis. Much more research will need to be done in this area of study.

## Summary of Research

### Paradigms for Theology and Culture

Many theologians have written on culture's place in theological method.<sup>37</sup> This dissertation briefly summarizes and interacts with two existing paradigms that help to locate the thesis of this dissertation in the landscape, and then examines broadly a theological methodology that is complementary with this thesis.

**Theology transcending culture.** The first paradigm expresses doctrinal categories that stand fixed and unadjusted throughout all of human history. This transcultural theological method does not dismiss the need for contextualization of propositional content, but seeks to answer universal concerns of humans that have always been true, without concern for the contemporary cultural milieu. In other words, contextualization demands a basic knowledge of culture; but for the process of discovering truth, culture plays no role. Discovering the truth about God and the world comes through study of his word, then application to the world.

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<sup>37</sup>Theological discussions of culture are sometimes relegated to the field of applied theology. David Dockery, for example, assembles articles dealing with culture with articles on ethics and church life under the heading, "New Dimensions in Applied Theology." In his edited work, one article does include culture in the task of theological formulation: Clark H Pinnock, "New Dimensions in Theological Method," in *New Dimensions in Evangelical Thought*, ed. David S. Dockery (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998), 205-06.

Charles Hodge typifies this paradigm when he notes that all the facts of theology are contained in the Scriptures and are to be compiled apart from dialogue with other sources.<sup>38</sup> In this method interaction with culture is not employed to clarify theology or contribute in methodology, but to serve as the object of Scripture's application.

**Theology embracing culture.** Theologian Stanley Grenz has popularized a second approach, the *integration* of culture to theology. This school of thought embraces culture not merely as a target for the contextualization of truth or as a component of the acting out of theological data,<sup>39</sup> but as a critical source in theological formulation. Grenz argues that culture is one of three sources of theology which perichoretically<sup>40</sup> dances alongside Scripture and tradition. Grenz proposes to bring our understanding of Scripture, cognizance of our heritage, and our reading of our cultural context into a creative dialogue.<sup>41</sup>

According to Grenz, this theological conversation necessarily entails these three sources because the meaning of cultural symbols changes over time. Thus, the ongoing conversation between the participants in the faith community continually

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<sup>38</sup>Charles Hodge, "Systematic Theology: The Method," in *The Living God*, vol. 1 of Readings in Christian Theology, ed. Millard J. Erickson (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1973), 21-28.

<sup>39</sup>Stanley Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 87. Grenz "conceives of theology as reflection on the faith commitment of the believing community" (ibid.).

<sup>40</sup>*Perichoresis* typically refers to the doctrine of the mutual co-inherence of the distinct members of the godhead. Defining the doctrine Gerald Bray writes, "In physical terms, one might say that all three persons occupy the same divine 'space'; to see God is to see all three at once, not one after the other in an ascending order of succession." The term is used by Grenz in reference to the similar co-significance of Scripture and tradition. Gerald Bray, *The Doctrine of God*, *Contours of Christian Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 158; see also, Oliver Crisp's excellent discussion of *nature-perichoresis* in his *Divinity and Humanity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 3-27. Thanks to Toby Jennings for helpfully stressing the need to locate this term *perichoresis* in its broader theological usage.

<sup>41</sup>Grenz, *Who Needs Theology?*, 112.

reinterprets the symbols of sacred texts, language, rituals and practices.<sup>42</sup> Thus, expressions of the faith made by the church are culturally conditioned and they must be nuanced.<sup>43</sup> For Grenz, culture plays an indispensable and authoritative role in the theological task because it records the early church's knowledge of God.

**Theology employing culture.** In my dissertation I will assume that the authoritative nature of Scripture is settled—not because it was one culture's sourcebook of knowledge of God—but because of Scripture's self-authentication that corresponds to reality and the inner witness of the Spirit.<sup>44</sup> In other words, the expressions of the faith

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<sup>42</sup>Stanley J. Grenz, *Renewing the Center: Evangelical Theology in a Post-Theological Era* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 206. Grenz traces this need to the rise of postmodernism. “[T]he postmodern

turn spells the end of theology. No longer can any one group, tradition, or subnarrative claim without reservation and qualification that their particular doctrinal perspective determines the whole of evangelicalism. Rather, the ongoing evangelical theological task includes (among other endeavors) a never-ending conversation about the meaning, in the contemporary context, of the symbols that as evangelicals they are committed to maintaining and that form the carriers of meaning for all. Grenz, *Renewing the Center*, 181. Grenz explains elsewhere, “The specificity of the Spirit’s speaking means that the conversation with cultural context is crucial to the hermeneutical task. We seek to listen to the voice of the Spirit through Scripture as the Spirit speaks to us in the particularity of the historical-cultural context in which we live.” Stanley J. Grenz, “Articulating the Christian Belief-Mosaic,” in *Evangelical Futures*, ed. John G. Stackhouse, Jr. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 127.

Some would describe Grenz’ process just articulated as “contextualization.” Conservative evangelicalism would not disagree that the conversation needs to continue as we seek to faithfully interpret and apply Scripture to our contemporary context. However, the suggestion that the meaning actually changes according to time and context is categorically different than contextualization.

<sup>43</sup>Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology*, 95.

<sup>44</sup>For fuller treatments of the authority of Scripture, see Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, vol. 3 (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1999); John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Word of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2010); idem, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1987); Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 1, *Prolegomena*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003); F. F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1988); D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge, eds., *Scripture and Truth* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992); idem, *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005); Michael S. Horton, *Covenant and Eschatology: The Divine Drama* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002); Meredith Kline, *The Structure of Biblical Authority* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1997); I. Howard Marshall, *Biblical Inspiration* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982); Craig A. Evans and Emanuel Tov, eds., *Exploring the Origins of the Bible: Canon Formation in Historical, Literary, and Theological Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008). For a perspective alternative to the aforementioned theologically conservative scholarship, see also Karl Barth, *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, vol. 1, *Church Dogmatics*, trans. G. T. Thomson (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1936); C. H. Dodd, *The Authority of the Bible*, rev. ed. (New York: Harper Torchbook, 1962); James Barr, *The Bible in the Modern World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973); William Barclay, *By What Authority?* (Bungay, Suffolk: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1974).

made by members of the church in the Bible are not culturally conditioned, they are breathed out by God and transcend the limitations characteristic of each subculture. Thus, this dissertation affirms the critiques of Grenz that are found in such works as *Reclaiming the Center*.<sup>45</sup> This dissertation is different from Grenz's proposal because it begins by recognizing that Scripture is authoritative because of its self-authentication.<sup>46</sup> The thesis of this dissertation—that culture contributes to the theological task—is unique because the author is writing from a decisively conservative evangelical perspective.

This dissertation is also different from the other theological methodology represented by Hodge. This dissertation agrees that Scripture possesses permanence and relevance in all times and cultures and that in many cases it confronts culture; its contribution to their approach is the idea that culture serves the theological task as existential revelation that subserviently serves Scripture by demonstrating observably its truth claims.<sup>47</sup> Thus, as a conservative evangelical, I will argue that a third paradigm should be explored and developed, taxonomized as “theology employing culture.” Though theology transcends culture and even confronts much of culture, the theological enterprise can employ culture in a positive yet discerning way that reflects neither

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<sup>45</sup>Millard J. Erickson et al., *Reclaiming the Center* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004). Indeed, as Dockery and Nelson note, “The biblical text is, indeed, the words of human authors in temporal-cultural context, but that does not limit the plausibility that God’s eternal revelation can be communicated through their writings through contemporary men and women.” David S. Dockery and David P. Nelson, “Special Revelation,” in *A Theology for the Church*, ed. Daniel L. Akin (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2007), 145.

<sup>46</sup>Due to space limitations, I will be unable to provide a full-scale critique of Grenz, though his writing will be a helpful contrasting dialogue partner as I clarify this third paradigm.

<sup>47</sup>This dissertation is also unique from Vanhoozer’s primary concerns in methodology. Speech-act theory drives his methodology to necessarily include theology’s performance as a part of “doing theology.” This dissertation is not so much concerned with what theology does with the truth by creating culture, but with how theology employs culture already existing. In other words, this paradigm does not proffer a position on how doing theology affects culture but on how theology should view culture.



wholesale dismissal nor embrace.<sup>48</sup> This employment requires an explication of culture as a channel of truth, as an existential appropriation of revelation.<sup>49</sup>

This paradigm fits loosely within Millard Erickson's seventh step in theological methodology, "Illumination from Extrabiblical Sources."<sup>50</sup> The actual task of doing theology, Erickson suggests, should follow a logical order of development that reflects the priority of Scripture.<sup>51</sup> He states that the Bible is systematic theology's major source, but that it is not the only one. In addition to employing special revelation, the theologian should also employ general revelation.<sup>52</sup> It is helpful "when it sheds light on the special revelation or fills it out at certain points where it does not speak."<sup>53</sup> Whereas Erickson merely speaks of general revelation as a complementary companion to special revelation, this dissertation will expand the conversation from general revelation to include culture. Thus, it will argue that culture is complementary to Scripture in a similar way that general revelation is complementary to Scripture.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>48</sup>My proposal to employ culture in theological method will require the development of a cultural hermeneutic that is governed by Scripture. James Leo Garrett rightly concluded that most Christian theologians would "place the resources of culture below the Scriptures, tradition, and Christian experience in the list of sources of systematic theology." James Leo Garrett, *Systematic Theology: Biblical, Historical, and Evangelical* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 1:23.

<sup>49</sup>This point by Paul Tillich is well taken: he critiqued the appeal to experience as constituting a theological norm; it is not the source of theology but rather the medium through which theology's sources are received. Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 1:42.

<sup>50</sup>Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 62-84.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid., 70, 75. He suggests that methodology should consult other cultural perspectives, noting that our own cultural presuppositions often blind us to the fact that we incorporate our own experiences into our biblical understanding and often blur the line between God's word and our opinion. Ibid., 74-75.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid., 75.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid. For example, the discipline of psychology defines the nature of addictive behavior in a scientific way that explains the biological factors surrounding enslavement to sin (e. g., Romans 6). Biblical language concerning enslavement to sin need not be discarded, but clarified and deepened in a way that integrates recent discoveries concerning the human mind.

<sup>54</sup>Culture complements Scripture, though sinful abuse and distortion of culture as it was intended to be necessitates due diligence.

## Culture

The definition of “culture” undergirds this dissertation’s thesis. Because the definition is both controversial and complex, this paper will cross disciplines, incorporating the insights of cultural anthropology and theology in order to develop a working definition that contributes to demonstrating its thesis.

A theological perspective nuances the anthropological definition explored below to prioritize the idea that culture is not merely meaningful in a generic anthropocentric sense, but in a transcendental theocentric sense: culture is a people group’s expression of their understanding of God. Analyzing this expression reveals each respective people group’s understanding of the revelation of God. In other words, culture is theological. It communicates information about God. Cobb summarizes this point nicely: “even the most common productions of human creativity can be interpreted theologically as indicating the presence and activity of God in the midst of human existence.”<sup>55</sup> Since culture is a people group’s articulation of its understanding of God and the world these products are cultural texts because texts are intentional human actions that call for interpretation.<sup>56</sup>

These cultural-theological texts are worth exploring as a significant exegetical endeavor. When exegeted properly these texts can deepen our understanding of God’s world.<sup>57</sup> Culture’s value in theological method rests on the truth that culture is an embodiment of God’s ideas, even though in a limited and distorted manner.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>55</sup>Cobb, *The Blackwell Guide to Theology and Popular Culture*, 90. Cobb takes this preliminary conclusion in a different direction than the conclusions reflected here; the point of commonality shared with Cobb is that culture in its most common form reveals something of the presence of God.

<sup>56</sup>Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Everyday Theology: How to Read Cultural Texts and Interpret Trends*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer et al. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 26. Furthermore, consider how every religion uses cultural texts to represent their teaching. Romanowski, *Eyes Wide Open*, 13.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid., 20.

<sup>58</sup>Cobb, *The Blackwell Guide to Theology and Popular Culture*, 72.

This preliminary construal of “culture” as a theological text has weighty biblical underpinnings that merit further explication: general revelation, common grace and *imago Dei*. *Imago Dei* helps us to understand that God created mankind to craft meaningful culture. General revelation helps us understand that God has bestowed truth content to all people of all time. Common grace helps us understand that God restrains sin from having its full effect and empowers men to produce “good” culture so that mankind’s theological articulation is not as wrong as it could be. These three theological underpinnings inform a primary contention of this dissertation: “culture” contributes to our understanding of the theological task because it is a theological expression of *imago Dei*-bearing, common grace-receiving, general revelation-transmitting people.

**Common grace.** Common grace is a work of God to impart blessings to all, indiscriminate of religion, gender, or culture.<sup>59</sup> Without renewing the heart, God universally exercises a moral influence that restrains sin, maintains order and promotes civility (Gen 20:6; Exod 34:23-24).<sup>60</sup> Common grace restrains even where it does not redeem.<sup>61</sup> It holds back corruption though it does not cleanse corrupt hearts.

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<sup>59</sup>Also see Grudem’s definition of common grace: “Common grace is the grace of God by which he gives people innumerable blessings that are not part of salvation.” Grudem rightly highlights the commonly understood distinction between common grace and saving grace. Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 657.

Whether or not the Holy Spirit is the member of the godhead who is the agent of common grace is contested. But this issue does not directly impact the contention of this dissertation. In the case of many authors cited below, they believe the work of God in common grace to be a work of the Holy Spirit. However, because my primary concern is not which member of the godhead is the agent of common grace, I will refer to the agent of common grace as “God.” The doctrine of inseparable operations of the Trinity is a helpful construct in this regard. For an introduction to this subject see Keith E. Johnson, *Rethinking the Trinity and Religious Pluralism: An Augustinian Assessment* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2011); Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 263-65.

<sup>60</sup>D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Great Doctrines of the Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2003), 2:24. Not only does God restrain evil, but he also sovereignly releases evil for his purposes (Exod 4:21; Josh 11:20; Isa 63:17; Ps 81:11-12; Rom 1:28).

<sup>61</sup>John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, Library of Christian Classics, vol. 21 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1960), 2.3.3. “But here it ought to occur to us that amid this corruption of nature there is some place for God’s grace; not such grace as to cleanse it, but to restrain it inwardly. . . . Thus God by his providence bridles perversity of

Not only does common grace restrain sin, but it enables goodness. Paul said of a group of unregenerate Gentiles that they naturally do things required by the law even though they do not have the law (Rom 2:14).<sup>62</sup> Indeed, “man cannot ascribe to himself even one single good work apart from God’s grace.”<sup>63</sup> In human culture, good exists because it is enabled so by God.<sup>64</sup> “Rich, varied, and remarkable capacities and abilities are therefore present in the human race, because [God] continues his work . . . in relation to the created order.”<sup>65</sup> He enables unregenerate men to develop the raw elements of nature and positively contribute to the fulfillment of the cultural mandate (Genesis 1:28).<sup>66</sup>

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nature, that it may not break forth into action; but he does not purge it within.” See also Anthony Hoekema, *Created in God’s Image* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 187-202.

<sup>62</sup>For an introduction to the representative views of this disputed passage see Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 116-126; Idem, “Did Paul Believe in Justification by Works? Another Look at Romans 2,” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 3 (1993): 131-58; Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 145-157; Colin G. Kruse, *Paul’s Letter to the Romans*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012); 130-40.

<sup>63</sup>Calvin, *Institutes* 2.3.12. Along with Augustine, Calvin recognizes no independent activity of the human will, but makes it wholly dependent on grace. *Ibid.*, 307-08.

<sup>64</sup>Because God’s work is present in all of the cosmos does not mean that his work is not in some ways restrictive. It is, in fact, very restrictive. The Spirit’s saving work and indwelling presence is indivisible with Christ’s work. Even his work of common grace is not operative apart from the purpose of drawing to Christ. The Son’s work is to point to the Father. The Spirit’s work is to point to the Son. Recognizing the Spirit’s universal work does not suggest that he is working to save all people. W. H. Griffith Thomas notes this in his Stone Lectures at Princeton in 1913. We cannot attribute “all the strivings of conscience in the heathen world” to the Holy Spirit. W. H. Griffith Thomas, *The Holy Spirit of God* (1913; London: Church Book Room Press, 1972), 185-86. That the Spirit saves is a different work than that the Spirit works. Not all of his activity is salvific. Sinclair B. Ferguson argues for the occasional presence of spiritual gifts even where saving grace is absent. See Sinclair B. Ferguson, *The Holy Spirit* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1996), 247.

<sup>65</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>66</sup>Everett F. Harrison, ed., *Baker’s Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1960), s.v. “Common Grace,” by Cornelius Van Til. Calvin notes, “We ought not to forget those most excellent benefits of the divine Spirit, which he distributes to whomever he wills, for the common good of mankind. The understanding and knowledge of Bezalel and Oholiab, needed to construct the Tabernacle, had to be instilled in them by the Spirit of God (Ex 31:2-11; 35:30-35). It is no wonder, then, that the knowledge of all that is most excellent in human life is said to be communicated to us through the Spirit of God. Nor is there reason for anyone to ask, ‘What have the impious, who are utterly estranged from God, to do with his Spirit?’ We ought to understand the statement that the Spirit of God dwells only in believers (Rom 8:9) as referring to the Spirit of sanctification through whom we are consecrated as temples to God (1 Cor 3:16).

Similarly, Martyn Lloyd-Jones affirms God's empowering common grace work in culture, emphasizing that Shakespeare's and Michelangelo's works were the result of the operation of God through common grace.<sup>67</sup> Karl Barth recognized that though Mozart did not "seem to have been a particularly active Christian," he made a significant theological contribution.<sup>68</sup> The cultural contributions made by the likes of Shakespeare, Michelangelo and Mozart do not lead us to bestow ultimate praise and commendation onto the human person himself, but on God.

Recognizing that all culture contains good sees the gifts in unregenerate human beings as gifts from God.<sup>69</sup> Every worthy value in any culture is from above (James 1:17). Because God showers down epistemological raindrops from a diverse host of clouds, we can take seriously the insights of these various secular disciplines. Thus, we can receive truth that God has revealed to all because all truth is from God. Christians may learn from culture developed by unbelievers, "even though we do not share their ultimate commitment. . . . We may therefore enjoy the cultural products of non-Christians in such a way as to glorify God through them—even though such praise of God was not

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Nonetheless he fills, moves, and quickens all things by the power of the same Spirit, and does so according to the character that he bestowed upon each kind by the law of creation. But if the Lord has willed that we be helped in physics, dialectic, mathematics, and other like disciplines, by the work and ministry of the ungodly, let us use this assistance . . . But lest anyone think a man truly blessed when he is credited with possessing great power to comprehend truth under the elements of this world (cf. Col 2:8), we should at once add that all this capacity to understand, with all the understanding that follows upon it, is an unstable and transitory thing in God's sight, when a solid foundation does not underlie it." Calvin, *Institutes* 2.2.16.

<sup>67</sup>Lloyd-Jones, *Great Doctrines of the Bible*, 2:25.

<sup>68</sup>Robert K. Johnston, *Reel Spirituality: Theology and Film in Dialogue* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 90-91. "Works which have drawn upon the truth and which have presented it to us in concentrated and vibrant form seize us, attract us to themselves powerfully, and no one ever—even centuries later—will step forth to deny them."

<sup>69</sup>Hoekema, *Created in God's Image*, 200.

part of the conscious intent of these artists.”<sup>70</sup> God has not restricted articulation of theological truth merely to the church, but to all on whom his common grace rests.<sup>71</sup>

The idea that the pagan world might contribute to the church’s understanding of the world may not be easy for the church to embrace; yet Wayne Grudem rests on the category of common grace to make this embrace possible and profitable.<sup>72</sup> Therefore, he notes that “we must be careful not to reject the good things that unbelievers do as totally evil.”<sup>73</sup> Every grain of truth and every glimmer of God’s presence should be recognized and accepted by the believer. Though we may begin with a physical response to the piece of culture we encounter, admiring its beauty, symmetry, or impact, culture has the capacity to stir our hearts to great thankfulness to God.<sup>74</sup> Undeserving sinners have received from the hand of God a treasure of the wisdom of God, and though their intention may not be to glorify God, it has this effect.

Indeed, the Old Testament writers believed that God infused vitality into creation, and was present and operative in culture.<sup>75</sup> John Calvin concurs, pointing out that God’s work is broader than some give credit.<sup>76</sup> More strongly, he argues that if we

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<sup>70</sup>Ibid.

<sup>71</sup>Even Neco—king of Egypt, and presumably unregenerate—spoke on behalf of God (2 Chr 35:20-27).

<sup>72</sup>Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 665. Also see Van Til, “Common Grace,” 131. Some criticize the general idea of common grace, positing that it is an unavoidable stepping-stone toward Arminianism. For example, see Henry Danhof and Herman Hoeksema, *Of Sin and Grace* (Jenison, MI: Reformed Free, 2003). Clark Pinnock recognizes the Reformed articulation of common grace, but refers to it as a way of admitting that human depravity is less than total without revising the doctrine. He concludes by calling the phrase “odd,” but commends Reformed thought for recognizing that the Spirit is at work in the whole world. Clark Pinnock, *Flame of Love* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1999), 200.

<sup>73</sup>Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 665.

<sup>74</sup>Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 665.

<sup>75</sup>Ibid., 22.

<sup>76</sup>Calvin, *Institutes* 2.2.15.

despise common grace gifts of art, science or skill we dishonor God.<sup>77</sup> He is at work not only in creation, but also in culture, beyond the scope of the church. When the church only looks for God's work inside her own walls, she remains ignorant and deprived of this vibrant theological activity.

**General revelation.** General revelation helps us to understand how mankind's cultural expression came to possess true knowledge of God and the world. General revelation undergirds the claim that culture is intrinsically theological because all people of all time possess revealed knowledge of God and express that knowledge in various cultural forms.

The study of general revelation nudges the typical evangelical outside of his comfort zone, but not because he is unfamiliar with or antagonistic to the doctrine. Instead, because of the evangelical tradition that has vigilantly defended the authority, inerrancy and sufficiency of Scripture. In 1987, David Diehl noted in his article "Evangelicalism and General Revelation: An Unfinished Agenda" that evangelicals have typically concentrated so heavily on special revelation that general revelation has seen few pages devoted to its development.<sup>78</sup> G. C. Berkouwer's work *General Revelation* dates back to 1951; the only text fully devoted to this subject to date is Bruce Demarest's *General Revelation: Historical Views and Contemporary Issues*.<sup>79</sup> The discussion below

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<sup>77</sup>Calvin says, "Whenever we come upon these matters in secular writers, let that admirable light of truth shining in them teach us that the mind of man, though fallen and perverted from its wholeness, is nevertheless clothed and ornamented with God's excellent gifts. If we regard the Spirit of God as the sole fountain of truth, we shall neither reject the truth itself, nor despise it wherever it shall appear, unless we wish to dishonor the Spirit of God. For by holding the gifts of the Spirit in slight esteem, we condemn and reproach the Spirit himself." Ibid. Anthony Hoekema summarizes Calvin's contribution: "1) unbelievers may have the light of truth shining in them; 2) unbelievers may be clothed with God's excellent gifts; 3) all truth comes from the Spirit of God; 4) therefore to reject or to despise the truth when it is uttered by unbelievers is to insult God's Holy Spirit." Anthony Hoekema, *Created in God's Image* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 190.

<sup>78</sup>David W. Diehl, "Evangelicalism and General Revelation: An Unfinished Agenda," *Journal of Evangelical Theological Society* 30 (1987): 442.

<sup>79</sup>Demarest, *General Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982).

stands on the shoulders of those who have established crucially important truths about God's special revelation but also assumes the value of focusing attention on general revelation.

In 1968, Millard Erickson noted that the neo-evangelical conception of general revelation "produces a positive attitude toward culture."<sup>80</sup> Erickson's positive attitude represents a shift from fundamentalism's separatist mentality. "Whereas fundamentalism had been rather culture-rejecting, the new evangelicalism is culture-affirming. Although the truth and its expression may be distorted as a result of sin, it is nonetheless to be found in various places."<sup>81</sup> Affirming general revelation nudges the arm forward to peel back the curtain often draped between the Christian and the world.<sup>82</sup>

People who are left to themselves do not live in accordance with this awareness; their lived-out perversion of general revelation further confirms the truth of general revelation in a public manner.<sup>83</sup> "Even when man, as it were, takes out his own eyes, this act itself turns revelational in his wicked hands, testifying to him that his sin is

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<sup>80</sup>Millard Erickson, *The New Evangelical Theology* (Westwood, NJ: Revell, 1968), 200.

<sup>81</sup>Ibid.

<sup>82</sup>Bavinck encourages us to celebrate general revelation in the visible world: "The visible world is as much a beautiful and lush revelation of God as the spiritual. He displays his virtues as much in the former as in the latter." Herman Bavinck, *In the Beginning: Foundations of Creation Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1999), 194.

<sup>83</sup>This "dark side of general revelation" (as Mark Coppenger calls it) is worthy of further exploration because it clarifies the contribution of culture to the theological task in a manner that accounts for the epistemological value of human behavior, even as it suppresses general revelation and receives the fruit of its reward. Coppenger thoroughly develops this idea in his book *Moral Apologetics for Contemporary Christians* (Nashville: B&H, 2011). He pushes back against those such as Christopher Hitchens, who claim that religion poisons everything. To the contrary, Christianity is not merely true, but it is demonstrably morally and culturally superior. This moral and cultural superiority of Christianity to other false systems is part of the record of human history and clearly seen by all. For example, Coppenger takes note of the nefarious fruit of Islam, Animism, Eastern Thought, and Irreligion. In contrast, Christianity has cultivated the wholesome fruit of confession, correction, commendation and celebration. As they do with other general revelation, Christianity's competitors do not unequivocally embrace this demonstrated fact. Coppenger acknowledges that some of these competitors reject Christianity's cultural contributions altogether, though other competitors nominally admit and welcome Christianity's contribution to the flourishing of humanity and her societies.



a sin against the light that lighteth every man coming into the world.”<sup>84</sup> In an ironic twist, the unregenerate person’s suppression of general revelation and God’s subsequent judgment does two things: (1) it validates the general revelation they continue to reject and (2) it expands the content of given knowledge through the cause-and-effect sequence of suppression followed by judgment.

God transmits general revelation to us externally through the created order and internally to the human heart, and we transmit general revelation to each other existentially in human experience. The conclusion that culture transmits revelatory content follows from this understanding that all people of all time have received revelation from God. To varying degrees, culture is a carrier and authenticator of God’s revelation because it represents the expressed religious knowledge of all people who know of God through his creation, their humanity and experience.<sup>85</sup>

***Imago Dei.*** Humans bear God’s image (Gen 1:27). A plethora of interpretations and applications of this doctrine abound, which underscores its difficulty and importance.<sup>86</sup> Biblical data on this doctrine is limited, but this has not precluded the

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<sup>84</sup>Van Til, “Nature and Scripture,” 270-71. Later, Van Til continues, “It is by grace, then, by the gift of the Holy Spirit alone, that sinners are able to observe the fact that all nature, including even their own negative attitude toward God, is revelational of God, the God of Scripture.” Ibid., 273.

<sup>85</sup>Some not only view culture as a setting to express religious knowledge, but religion itself. Lesslie Newbigin defines “culture” in this way: “By the word culture we have to understand the sum total of ways of living developed by a group of human beings and handed on from generation to generation. Central to culture is language. The language of a people provides the means by which they express their way of perceiving things and of coping with them. Around that center one would have to group their visual and musical arts, their technologies, their law, and their social and political organization. And one must also include in culture, and as fundamental to any culture, a set of beliefs, experiences, and practices that seek to grasp and express the ultimate nature of things, that which gives shape and meaning to life, that which claims final loyalty. I am speaking, obviously, about religion.” Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1986), 3. For more on popular culture on religion, see Michael Jindra, “It’s About Faith in Our Future: *Star Trek* Fandom as Cultural Religion,” in *Religion and Popular Culture in America*, ed. Bruce David Forbes and Jeffrey H. Mahan (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); and Theodore Turnau, “Popular Cultural ‘Worlds’ as Alternative Religions,” *Christian Scholar’s Review* 37, no. 3 (Spring 2008): 323-45.

<sup>86</sup>Bavinck, for example, critiques two broad schools of thought: the naturalistic rendering that Pelagius embraced, as well as the Roman Catholic Supernaturalism that developed out of the idea of the

vast attention that it has received.<sup>87</sup> Lewis and Demarest call attention to its importance when they state, “The most important matter in Christian anthropology concerns the meaning of the proposition that God created the human person in his own image and likeness.”<sup>88</sup> For the justification of this dissertation’s thesis, this doctrine is vital.<sup>89</sup> For the immediate purposes of this introduction, I will briefly summarize that which is most relevant to introducing the reader to this dissertation’s content.

This dissertation will argue for two primary implications of the *imago Dei*: (1) man<sup>90</sup> expresses truth about God by creating culture, and (2) man comprehends truth

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state of glory to which believers are elevated by Christ and his Spirit. Bavinck, *In the Beginning*, 16ff. He notes the wide range of opinions in the Christian church. “At times it was located in the human body, then in rationality, or in the freedom of the will, then again in dominion over the created world, or also in other moral qualities such as love, justice, and the like. But gradually two views came to the fore side.”

Millard Erickson categorizes the perspectives into three: substantive, relational and functional. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 520–27. These positions each possess relative merit, but the position that this dissertation employs is a substantive position that reflects Herman Bavinck’s insistence that “the whole person is the image of the whole.” Herman Bavinck, *In the Beginning: Foundations of Creation Theology* (Grand Rapids, Baker, 1999), 159. Man’s dominion over creation is a necessary consequence of his ontological status as an image-bearer of God. I will argue that a bifurcation between man’s ontology and function is unnecessary and can be misleading.

<sup>87</sup>In a helpful chapter, J. Richard Middleton summarizes historical and contemporary approaches to “The Challenge of Interpreting the Imago Dei,” in *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2005).

<sup>88</sup>Gordon R. Lewis and Bruce A. Demarest, *Integrative Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 2:124.

<sup>89</sup>The conclusions in this dissertation will reflect assumptions contrary to Luther’s equating of the image with original righteousness. Luther perceived of man as a unity, so the Fall was comprehensive. Martin Luther, *Luther’s Commentary on Genesis*, trans. J. Theodore Muller (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958), 30-31. The image consisted of man’s original state of perfection, of which we hardly can know until we are restored. “But until all this is accomplished and perfected in us we hardly can know what the image of God was, which we have lost by sin in paradise.” Martin Luther, *Luther’s Commentary on Genesis*, trans. J. Theodore Muller (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958), 32. Berkhof qualifies Luther’s position as a “restricted view” of the image. Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949), 207. John Calvin emphasized a greater continuity, it seems, between knowledge of God and man. “We cannot attain to a clear and solid knowledge of God, without a mutual acquaintance with ourselves.” Calvin, *Institutes* 1:202. This is not to say that God is man and man is divine. Calvin is merely emphasizing the continuity between the knowledge of God and man.

<sup>90</sup>I will use “man” to refer to humankind. See Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 440; cf. 454–68; see also Raymond C. Ortlund, Jr., “Male-Female Equality and Male Headship: Genesis 1–3,” in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*, ed. John Piper and Wayne Grudem (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1991), 98.

about God by exegizing culture.<sup>91</sup> In other words, as image-bearers of God, “man possesses the possibility both to create something beautiful, and to delight in it.”<sup>92</sup> One of the implications of bearing the image of God is that human beings possess theological capacity to cooperate with God both to communicate and interpret theological truth.<sup>93</sup>

The study of nature and of man’s cultivation of nature yields insights into the character of God. As Bavinck notes, God is spirit, but he created a material world that is his revelation and manifestation, with this revelation coming to its climax in the incarnation.<sup>94</sup> That God created a material world to be good and that he commissioned his image-bearers to reflect him by cultivating the raw materials of nature leads to two conclusions: (1) mankind’s fashioning and cultivating of God’s creation into human culture reflects God’s identity as Creator, and (2) mankind’s study of this culture is similar to learning about God through nature.

Thus, humans mirror God—though not perfectly.<sup>95</sup> “To be God’s image bearer is to be human, and to be human is to be a cultural agent carrying on God’s creative work

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<sup>91</sup>Another way to say this is that we are speaking about God when we express ourselves by creating culture.

<sup>92</sup>Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism: The Stone Lectures of 1898* (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2009), 142.

<sup>93</sup>Calvin’s idea of the *sensus divinitatus* makes a similar point. The *sensus* is to be distinguished from the idea that God is present in us in such a way as to be a “constitutive principle” of human existence. See Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, trans. William V. Dych (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1978), 116.

<sup>94</sup>Bavinck, *In the Beginning*, 192-93. “From the beginning creation was so arranged and human nature was immediately so created that it was amenable to and fit for the highest degree of conformity to God and for the most intimate indwelling of God.”

<sup>95</sup>As Bavinck notes, “The entire world is a revelation of God, a mirror of his attributes and perfections. Every creature in its own way and degree is the embodiment of a divine thought. But among creatures only man is the image of God, God’s highest and richest self-revelation and consequently the head and crown of the whole creation, image of God and the epitome of nature both *mikrotheos* (microgod) and microcosms (microcosm). Even pagans have recognized this reality and called man the image of God. Pythagoras, Plato, Ovid, Cicero, Seneca, and others distinctly state that man, or at least the soul of man, was created as God’s image, that he is God’s kin and offspring.” Bavinck, *Creation Theology*, 160-61. Similarly, Calvin states, “The exact symmetry of the universe is a mirror, in which we may contemplate the otherwise invisible God.” Calvin, *Institutes* 1.5.59.

by fashioning ways of life that promote love, creativity, kindness, mercy, justice, truth, and stewardship.”<sup>96</sup> Thus, to study the product of human culture is to study God in an indirect way.<sup>97</sup>

Anthropologists agree that culture is meaningful.<sup>98</sup> As some have pointed out, culture is not an artifact<sup>99</sup> as much as it is a living worldview, an expression of belief. It involves artifacts, but cannot be reduced to them. Culture “denotes an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which [people] communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life.”<sup>100</sup> Though different cultures say different things, they all say something meaningful.

Some point to this meaning dimension of culture as a network of presuppositions that helps members of society understand the world and their behavior in it. Culture involves the “presupposed, taken-for-granted models of the world that are widely shared (although not necessarily to the exclusion of other, alternative models) by the members of a society and that play an enormous role in their understanding of that

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<sup>96</sup>Romanowski, *Eyes Wide Open*, 16. Henry Van Til concurs: “Since man is a moral being, his culture cannot be a-moral. Because man is a religious being, his culture too, must be religiously oriented. There is no pure culture, in the sense of being neutral religiously, or without positive or negative value ethically.” Henry Van Til, *The Calvinistic Concept of Culture* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1959; repr., 2001), 27.

<sup>97</sup>I am not arguing that universal human religious experience is the foundation of theology. The foundation is Scripture. While it is clear that there is no such thing as context-free, universal human reasoning, that all of our knowledge is situated and socially conditioned, this presents us with no epistemological crisis. Divine revelation is the most basic of epistemological axioms. We know God rightly in order to know our world rightly. Bavinck clarifies, “The human is not the divine self but is nevertheless a finite creaturely impression of the divine. All that is in God—his spiritual essence, his virtues and perfections, his immanent self-distinctions, his self-communication and self-revelation in creation—finds its admittedly finite and limited analogy and likeness in humanity. . . . Among creatures human nature is the supreme and most perfect revelation of God.” Bavinck, *In the Beginning*, 194.

<sup>98</sup>Though for secular anthropologists this meaning possesses no transcendent ground.

<sup>99</sup>Roy G. D’Andrade, *The Development of Cognitive Anthropology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 250.

<sup>100</sup>Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 89.

world and their behavior in it.”<sup>101</sup> Clifford Geertz describes culture as comprising the “webs of significance” that people spin and in which they themselves are suspended.<sup>102</sup> In this understanding, culture both reflects and refracts belief. Culture is like a conversation, in that it “moves back and forth between reflecting and shaping the surrounding culture and people in the culture.”<sup>103</sup> It gives the world a mirror to see human hearts and it gives the human heart an audience of the world. In anthropological perspective then, the general consensus is that culture can be broadly understood broadly as “the meaning dimension of social life.”<sup>104</sup>

### **Theology Employing Culture**

#### **Scripture Affirmed as Authoritative**

Because Scripture is inspired by God, its words are God’s words and carry with them God’s authority.<sup>105</sup> As such, they are the clearest record of God’s revelation of himself to us. They are humanly written yet divinely inspired<sup>106</sup> (1 Pet 1:21; 2 Tim 3:16),

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<sup>101</sup>Naomi Quinn and Dorothy Holland, “Culture and Cognition,” in *Cultural Models in Language and Thought*, ed. Dorothy Holland and Naomi Quinn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 4.

<sup>102</sup>Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 5.

<sup>103</sup>Turnau, *Popologetics*, 21. Culture both reflects the popular imagination and informs it at the same time.

<sup>104</sup>Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 31.

<sup>105</sup>Wayne Grudem defines Scripture’s authority: “All the words in Scripture are God’s words in such a way that to disbelieve or disobey any word of Scripture is to disbelieve or disobey God.” Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 73.

<sup>106</sup>Even Clark Pinnock acknowledged that “the prime theological issue . . . on biblical authority is the need to maintain with equal force both the humanity and divinity of the Word of Scripture.” Clark Pinnock, “Three Views of the Bible in Contemporary Theology,” in *Biblical Authority*, ed. Jack B. Rogers (Waco: Word, 1977), 71.

and as such are completely true (Num 23:19; Ps 12:6; 119:89, 96; Prov 30:5; Matt 24:35; John 17:17; Ps 12:6; Prov 30:5). “It is the Word of God written in the words of men.”<sup>107</sup>

Grudem agrees that though the Bible is necessary for certain knowledge of God’s will, maintaining spiritual life and for knowledge of the Gospel, he argues that the Bible is “not necessary for knowing that God exists or for knowing something about God’s character and moral laws.”<sup>108</sup> Indeed, David Dockery and David Nelson note that “divine truth exists outside special revelation; but it is consistent with and supplemental to, not a substitute for, special revelation. General revelation is consistent with special revelation but distinct from it.”<sup>109</sup> Though distinct, the Scripture is necessary in order to understand general revelation. General revelation and special revelation together possess continuity because the culmination of each is Christ. Jesus is the central figure of divine revelation; he is the ultimate focus of the Christian faith.<sup>110</sup> In conclusion, the Bible is to be employed as the ultimate standard of authority for God’s people<sup>111</sup> because the Bible finally and exclusively reveals the uniqueness of Christ and the message of the gospel.

### **Culture Appropriated as Ancillary**

The contributory role of culture in the theological task must be acknowledged in light of Scripture’s authoritative status. In other words, we should celebrate and

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<sup>107</sup>Dockery and Nelson, “Special Revelation,” 129. As Dockery and Nelson note, some contend that the Bible is essentially a human product of an illumined religious consciousness. See Gene M. Tucker and Douglas A. Knight, eds., *Humanizing America’s Iconic Book* (Chico, CA: Scholars, 1982); Also see Edward Farley and Peter C. Hodgson, “Scripture and Tradition,” in *Christian Theology: An Introduction to Its Traditions and Tasks*, ed. Peter C. Hodgson and Robert H. King (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982).

<sup>108</sup>Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 116-24. He cites Ps 19:1; Acts 14:16-17; Rom 1:19-21, 32; 2:14-15.

<sup>109</sup>Dockery and Nelson, “Special Revelation,” 119.

<sup>110</sup>Ibid., 123. Also see H. D. McDonald, *Jesus—Human and Divine: An Introduction to Christology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1968); Carl F. H. Henry, *The Identity of Jesus of Nazareth* (Nashville: Broadman & Homan, 1992).

<sup>111</sup>Dockery and Nelson, “Special Revelation,” 172.

employ the revelatory light of culture but balance our approach by recognizing the limitations of culture's role in the theological task. Culture is limited because it (1) reflects incomplete information, (2) reveals a spirit of conflict with God's grace that sustains and empowers it, and (3) reveals corruption in the image-bearer's ability to image. In other words, general revelation is insufficient. Common grace is not effectual to salvation. The *imago Dei* is cracked. These three limitations locate culture as an ancillary contributor. These limitations prevent culture's wholesale embrace as a theological source. Culture's limitations necessitate a hermeneutic of culture that appropriates it as ancillary to Scripture.

### **Conclusion**

This introduction has outlined the nature of the issue, its promises and perils, along with my presuppositions, thesis and the method of demonstrating my thesis. This introduction has also summarized the content of this dissertation, introducing the reader to the arguments that merit further explanation and defense.

CHAPTER 2  
CULTURE IN THE THEOLOGICAL TASK

**Introduction**

The purpose of this chapter is to orient the reader to the discussion concerning culture in the theological task. First, it will clarify some important lessons that have emerged from the most widely read book related to this subject. Second, it will briefly examine the primary representative ways that evangelical theologians appropriate culture in the theological task. Third, it will introduce the idea that the thesis of this dissertation is plausible in a confessional evangelical theological framework.<sup>1</sup> Locating this proposal in the evangelical landscape will benefit from a taxonomy of sorts; essentially, some theologians wage war with culture, others invite culture to the dinner table and still others seem willing at least to have a front porch conversation. A three-category taxonomy will emerge as a framework for the clarification of the thesis. By way of introduction and clarification to this potentially cumbersome and unwieldy task, let us begin by celebrating some applicable lessons that have emerged from decades of scrutiny aimed at H. Richard Niebuhr’s seminal taxonomic examination, *Christ and Culture*.<sup>2</sup>

**Lessons from Christ and Culture**

Rarely does a Christian discussion involve “culture” that does not also include *Christ and Culture*. This book—though published in 1951—continues to be an oft-referenced taxonomy and helpful starting point for any discussion regarding the things of

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<sup>1</sup>See R. Albert Mohler, “Confessional Evangelical,” in *Four Views on the Spectrum of Evangelicalism*, ed. Andrew David Naselli (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011).

<sup>2</sup>H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper and Row, 1951).



Christ and things of culture.<sup>3</sup> Though others have taken up similar approaches exploring the relationship between Christians and culture, Niebuhr's has received considerably more attention.<sup>4</sup> Paul Ramsay claims that it is "without any doubt the one outstanding book in the field of basic Christian ethics."<sup>5</sup> Former student of Niebuhr at Yale, James Gustafson provides "an appreciative interpretation" in the preface of the new edition.<sup>6</sup> Its continued attention, even into the twenty-first century, pushes Niebuhr's work front and center in this discussion.

Despite the praise *Christ and Culture* is not without its critics. John Howard Yoder and Craig Carter have led the charge, expositing Niebuhr's particular weaknesses and consequently propelling the conversation forward.<sup>7</sup> Though his work possesses weaknesses, it helps this conversation by providing a platform from which to refine and define that which pertains to the demonstration of the current thesis. Thus, the goal is not to extrapolate and employ Niebuhr's Christ and culture categories directly to the relationship between theology and culture, but to identify key lessons that have emerged from the decades of scrutiny that his work has received. What follows are five distilled

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<sup>3</sup>D. A. Carson notes that Niebuhr's far and influential reach is due in part to the fact that his analysis targets such a wide audience and uses examples from every major period of church history. D. A. Carson, *Christ & Culture Revisited* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008). John Howard Yoder adds that many have even taken Niebuhr's taxonomy and stretched its application beyond its intended reach. John Howard Yoder, "How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned: A Critique of *Christ and Culture*," in *Authentic Transformation: A New Vision of Christ and Culture*, ed. Glen H. Stassen, D. M. Yeager, and John Howard Yoder (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 271 n. 2.

<sup>4</sup>For examples of similar efforts, see Howard A. Snyder, *Models of the Kingdom* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2001), and Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 2nd ed. (Dublin: Gill & MacMillan, 1988). Niebuhr's work still stands supreme, despite George Marsden's opinion that his categories "in their present form could be near the end of [their] usefulness." George Marsden, "Christianity and Cultures: Transforming Niebuhr's Categories," *Insights: The Faculty Journal of Austin Seminary* 115, no. 1 (Fall 1999): 4-5.

<sup>5</sup>Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, back cover.

<sup>6</sup>James Gustafson, "Preface: An Appreciative Interpretation," in Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, xxi-xxxv.

<sup>7</sup>Also providing a helpful critical examination of *Christ and Culture* is D. A. Carson, *Christ & Culture Revisited* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).

polemical responses that will refine this project in its early development: (1) the dangers of miscontextualizing Niebuhr's conclusions, (2) the need to admit subjective authorial presuppositions rather than cloaking them in objectivism, (3) the danger of totalizing conclusions, (4) the importance of handling Scripture well, (5) the necessity of proper definition.

Modern-day readers face the inevitable challenge of forgetting the context in which Niebuhr wrote, thus the framework for understanding his conclusions.<sup>8</sup> Historian George Marsden argued that because Niebuhr wrote in the wake of Nazism and fascism, and the horrors of World War II and the atomic bomb, he was addressing the debate over how best to build a civilization that was free from the worst evils of his day.<sup>9</sup> More precisely, he was countering those social theorists who saw Christianity as a threat to a peaceful civilization and an incompetent contributor to Western culture.<sup>10</sup> His concern was for building "a mainstream culture to which socially progressive Christianity might make a contribution."<sup>11</sup> Marsden's point is well taken; the context of Niebuhr's question informed the nature of his response and is helpful for deciphering his contribution to

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<sup>8</sup>Marsden's critique finds its vastly different context as the starting point for the conclusion that Niebuhr's categories have lost their relevance. "The 1940s are virtually a lost era to most of us today. We can hardly imagine what it was like to be an adult in that time. Just to mention the most obvious difference that separates us: we live in an era in which we take multiculturalism for granted. Niebuhr wrote at a time when 'Amos 'n Andy' was a top radio show, racial segregation was still legal, and the principal agenda for himself and his audience was building a unified culture, e pluribus unum." Marsden, "Christianity and Cultures," 5.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 4-5.

<sup>10</sup>In particular, Niebuhr notes three recurring arguments: (1) Christians are motivated by a contempt for earthly existence and confidence in a future, heavenly existence. (2) Christians rely on God's grace to the exclusion of human achievement. (3) Christians are intolerant of others because of their claim to exclusive truth. Niebuhr, *Christ & Culture*, 5-9. Marsden comments, "For people like Niebuhr, totalitarianism abroad and racism at home provided the most immediate context for thinking about the reforms that a progressive Christianity might bring to civilization." Marsden, "Christianity and Cultures," 5.

<sup>11</sup>Marsden, "Christianity and Cultures," 9. For a helpful discussion of this point Marsden references Richard J. Mouw and Sander Griffioen, and their work in *Pluralism and Horizons* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 134-40.

twenty-first century sensibilities. Thus, in a similar way that Niebuhr was situated in a particular time and location, we also are situated in a context in which our question is framed. This is not to suggest that our context determines our conclusions, but that it impacts and influences our conclusions. Being aware of our context prompts us to expose and critique it, ever pursuing greater refinements of truth. One who would examine the relationship between theology and culture must embrace his own finitude and openly acknowledge his situatedness in light of divine revelation, the only reliable axiomatic starting point.

Secondly, Yoder critiques Niebuhr for cloaking his subjective presuppositions in objectivity. Niebuhr concludes that “Christ Transforming Culture” is the preferred approach, though he does not openly admit this to be the case. Throughout the book Niebuhr posits a pluralistic posture that prizes objectivity without prescription, but his actual critique of four categories to the neglect of his fifth category reveals a predisposition to this fifth category.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, Yoder suggests that Niebuhr was vague enough in his description of “transformation” that his readers resonated with it by importing their own meaning.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, the western doctrine of progress implied that even culture was coming closer and closer to what it was intended to be.<sup>14</sup> Niebuhr’s apparent proclivity toward the fifth category naturally inclines the reader to embrace favorably the fifth category.

Not only does the internal evidence suggest a stacked deck, but also the effect of the book on its readers corroborates that Niebuhr was most favorable to this fifth model. Craig Carter notes that it has convinced “educated young people from peace church, charismatic-Pentecostal, pietistic, fundamentalist, evangelical and other non-

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<sup>12</sup>This cloaked subjectivism is actually a “very common criticism,” as Bruce L. Guenther describes in “The ‘Enduring Problem’ of Christ and Culture,” *Direction* 34, no. 2 (Fall 2005): 215-27.

<sup>13</sup>Yoder, “How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned,” 53.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*

mainstream traditions that their heritage of significant opposition to important aspects of the majority culture is something of which to be ashamed and which must be discarded if one is to become responsible and culturally engaged.”<sup>15</sup> Indeed, Paul Ramsey has noted that most embrace the fifth approach, *Christ Transforming Culture*, by the time they finish reading the book.<sup>16</sup> This widely reported embrace of the fifth category does not exclusively prove Niebuhr’s predisposition but it does empirically confirm the suspicion of inconsistency that was raised by the internal analysis of his work. The application to this current conversation is simple: honestly acknowledge presuppositions and then assess, defend and revise them. This is not to say that an author may not be favorable to one model over another; in fact, he should argue for a position. However, in arguing for his position, this examination of the relationship between theology and culture should openly admit to authorial subjectivity without cloaking it in supposed objectivity.<sup>17</sup>

A third critique is one that Niebuhr readily admitted; namely, the limitations of typology. In other words, no single category exhaustively defines the proper Christian response to culture in all circumstances. Though his categories have received the criticism that all categories receive—that is, that “ideal types” are never quite as neat in

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<sup>15</sup>Craig A. Carter, “The Legacy of an Inadequate Christology: Yoder’s Critique of Niebuhr’s *Christ and Culture*,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* (July 2003): 387-401.

<sup>16</sup>Quoted in Yoder, “How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned,” 53. Also see Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989), 40, where the authors assert, “Niebuhr set up the argument in such a way as to ensure that the transformist would be viewed as the most worthy.” By way of further anecdote, this tendency to embrace the fifth category was true for me when I first began the foray of *Christ and Culture*. When I first read the book I noted Niebuhr’s exhortation toward a pluralistic approach but still resonated with his fifth category. Students in a college class I taught—in which this book was assigned reading—also overwhelmingly resonated with the fifth type.

<sup>17</sup>Mark Cambron, a dean at the Tennessee Temple Schools in the early 1950’s, provides a helpful example of how a purely objective and inductive approach to theology is impossible. He filled every page with arranged quotations from his King James Version of the Bible. He attempted to give an objective, factual theology that was free from assumptions and bias. However, David K. Clark has pointed out that even Cambron’s selection and arrangement of texts depended on implicit assumptions. His error was not that he permitted his assumptions to influence his work; it is that he failed to acknowledge and account for them. David K. Clark, *To Know and Love God*, *Foundations of Evangelical Theology*, ed. John S. Feinberg (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2003), 49.

life as they are on paper<sup>18</sup>—they at least provide a starting point for identification, conversation and reformation. Niebuhr admitted that the proper Christian response to culture has been difficult to pinpoint. He even suggests that in the midst of the enterprise of relating Christ and culture one must be careful not to prefer only one paradigm as legitimate.<sup>19</sup> Categories can work as long as one does not suggest that they are mutually exclusive or totalizing.<sup>20</sup> We may at various times be of culture, against culture or transforming culture.<sup>21</sup> His categories are “by no means wholly exclusive of each other, and there are possibilities of reconciliation at many points among the various positions.”<sup>22</sup> Indeed, one of his primary contributions is to demonstrate the immense complexity that is easily overlooked by the cultural despisers of Christianity. This conversation must proceed with this complexity in mind.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>This criticism is a primary critique offered by Yoder, who accuses Niebuhr of categorizing people in ways that are not fairly representative nor identifiable even by said category’s constituency. Yoder, “How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned” 46. In addition, Marsden cites two conferences held at Vanderbilt University that assessed the legacy of Niebuhr’s work. Historians of Christianity concluded that they respected Niebuhr and his contributions to the conversation, but a number argued strongly that the categories did not fairly represent actual history. Marsden, “Christianity and Cultures,” 10. Charles Scriven is also up in arms, suggesting that the Anabaptist position is best for Christ transforming culture. Charles Scriven, *The Transformation of Culture: Christian Social Ethics After H. Richard Niebuhr* (Independence, MO: Herald, 1988). Michael McConnell offers constructive suggestions for approaching this subject based on what Christians actually do, thus creating new categories. Michael McConnell, “Christ, Culture and Courts: A Niebuhrian Examination of First Amendment Jurisprudence,” *DePaul Law Review* 42, no. 1 (Fall 1992): 191-221. I am indebted to the summary in John F. Wilson, “The Last Type in Christ and Culture and the End for which It was Created” (paper for conference on “The Enduring Problem: H. Richard Niebuhr’s Christ and Culture After Forty Years,” Vanderbilt University, 1994): 1, 4-15.

<sup>19</sup>Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 11.

<sup>20</sup>Carson makes a similar point when he notes that none of Niebuhr’s historical examples fit quite as neatly in their boxes as he seems to believe. Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited*, 39-40.

<sup>21</sup>Niebuhr admitted this complexity in his essay published as a book, *The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry: Reflections on the Aims of Theological Education* (New York: Harper and Row, 1956), 26. “The world is sometimes enemy, sometimes partner of the Church, often antagonist, always one to be befriended; now the one that does not know what the Church knows, now the knower of what the Church does not know.”

<sup>22</sup>Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 231.

<sup>23</sup>Marsden offered a helpful way forward when he suggested that these categories are merely leading motifs, dominant themes that generally represent a plurality of interactive models. In music, a

Though this thesis concludes that not one category is totalizing, embracing the benefits of typology behooves the project to clarity because it helps to expose presuppositions and deal with them appropriately.<sup>24</sup> Without the muddy categories our thinking is even more muddled, or worse, not even present.

The fourth issue relates to Niebuhr's handling of Scripture. Carson points out that though Niebuhr begins correctly by *trying* to ground his five patterns in the Scriptures themselves, Niebuhr ultimately fails.<sup>25</sup> He falls short not only in his use of Scripture to justify these two categories, but also in his general failure to read the Scripture canonically. He pits Paul against Paul by appealing to Galatians to exemplify "Christ against culture" while failing to reconcile this with the less confrontational stand found in Romans 13. The emphasis in Revelation on the confrontation between "Christ and Satan, between the new Jerusalem and Babylon, between the bride of Christ and the great whore—in short, between Christ and culture"?<sup>26</sup> The canon is unified. Proper interpretation of Scripture on its own terms demands a canonical reading.

A fifth issue relates to the question of definition, which is perhaps the most discussed critique of *Christ and Culture*. At its most basic point this critique levels that Niebuhr's terms "Christ" and "culture" are not well defined.

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dominant motif may be subordinated in one part of a symphony while another becomes prominent. This concept does not imply that the motifs should be discarded because they are not totalizing, but that they should be appropriated accordingly.

<sup>24</sup>“While the tensions inherent in Christ and culture may vary, they will always be present—and they will always require our ongoing reflection, engagement, and decisiveness.” Laurel Neal, “Grappling with Niebuhr: Negotiating Tension and Balance in the Reflective Christian Life,” *Insights: The Faculty Journal of Austin Seminary* 115, no. 1 (Fall 1999): 36.

<sup>25</sup>Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited*, 36-39. Specifically, he refers to Niebuhr's failure to ground “Christ of culture” in Scripture at all. With regard to “Christ the transformer of culture,” Niebuhr grounds this pattern wrongly in the Gospel of John. “He is forced to concede that the New Testament document most conducive to this line of thought cannot be taken to support it, at least in its pure form, because it is too “particularistic”—and, we should add, too much enmeshed in futurist eschatology and in a comprehensive vision of the rebellion and idolatry of the ‘world.’” *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, 43.

By “culture,” Niebuhr means “the total process of human activity and the total result of such activity to which now the name *culture*, now the name *civilization*, is applied in common speech . . . ; it comprises language, habits, ideas, beliefs, customs, social organization, inherited artifacts, technical processes, and values.”<sup>27</sup> Niebuhr essentially defines culture monolithically as everything that people do and believe.

This monolithic definition presents two immediate challenges: (1) how culture can avoid embracing Christianity, and how one can analyze the relationship between Christ and culture is difficult to see.<sup>28</sup> His conclusion is that “culture” is that part of the world that is totally devoid of Christ. Already, then, the antithesis between Christ and culture charges to the fore. Carson points out that what is really at stake in Niebuhr’s definition is two sources of authority: Christ and other-than-Christ.<sup>29</sup> Armed with this understanding the reader can make sense of Niebuhr’s categories and his preference for the transformation category. (2) The additional challenge, of course, is that if this definition is accurate then we must *totally* withdraw from, *totally* transform or *totally* accommodate to everything people do.<sup>30</sup> Because the starting definition is oversimplified, the ensuing response will also be oversimplified, failing to nuance between different types or caveats of culture. Marsden suggests that we can indeed correct Niebuhr’s flaw so as better to employ Niebuhr’s contributions.<sup>31</sup> Starting with a careful, theologically informed definition of “culture,” Christians could possibly adopt a multitude of different stances simultaneously in different realms of culture, such as

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<sup>27</sup>Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 32.

<sup>28</sup>Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited*, 12.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid.

<sup>30</sup>Yoder, “How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned,” 54-55.

<sup>31</sup>Marsden, “Christianity and Cultures,” 9.

morality, aesthetics, family structures or communication.<sup>32</sup> Culture's definition must reflect this complexity, and its relationship to the theological task must be carefully appropriated.

Niebuhr inadequately defines not only culture, but Christ, as well. To his credit, his "Christ" is not "infinitely plastic."<sup>33</sup> Nevertheless, his Christ is too broad and at times sub-biblical.<sup>34</sup> In essence, Niebuhr's definition of Christ fails to acknowledge that Christ and culture do not stand in completely separate realms. In other words, the implications of the full humanity of Christ must be taken into account. Yoder and Carter claim that Niebuhr embraces a vacuous Christ devoid of his teaching, example, call to discipleship, promise of the Spirit, atoning death and resurrection and his Great Commission.<sup>35</sup> The direct accusation is that Niebuhr's Christ is docetic, not representing Chalcedonian Christology that affirms the fully human, culturally embedded Jesus.<sup>36</sup> This definition—they argue—undermines the whole project.

Whether or not their conclusion that Niebuhr's entire project is undermined by docetic Christology is irrelevant to this thesis.<sup>37</sup> The important conclusion for this project

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<sup>32</sup>Furthermore, the Christian's approach to each realm of culture should reflect complexity of composition as well. Francis Schaeffer, for example, calls for four standards of judgment for art: (1) technical excellence, (2) validity, (3) intellectual content and (4) the integration of content and vehicle. We may stand *with* a cultural piece on a technical level but reject its worldview message, thus appreciating a work of art for its physical intricacy, yet eschewing its lies and ultimately its inherent incoherence. Francis Schaeffer, *Art and the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006), 62-71.

<sup>33</sup>Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited*, 10.

<sup>34</sup>Carson argues this point. *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup>Carter, "The Legacy of an Inadequate Christology," 4.

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*, 4, 6. Carter also argues that the reason Niebuhr had a thin, docetic Christology is that his argument against the radical Christ-against-culture position required it.

<sup>37</sup>This discussion could perhaps be taken up elsewhere. The immediate objective is to employ the insights of these enduring critiques in this "theology and culture" discussion. For example, Marsden offers a helpful nudge in the right direction when he says that the "essential point is to shift the terminology, as I do here, from 'Christ and culture' to 'Christianity and cultures' and to point out that this is shorthand for saying 'The culture of Christianity and other cultures.'" Marsden, "Christianity and Cultures," 8.



is that robust definitions matter, especially with regard to the relationship between theology and culture set forth in this project. The lesson learned and imminently applied to this conversation is that the two categories in relationship—“culture” and the “theological task”—must be properly defined in order to most properly study their relationship. Consequently, this project will endeavor to respect both the complexity of “culture” by crafting a definition that reflects this, and the necessity of expediently explaining the scope and nature of the theological task.

Five polemical responses serve as guardrails, prompting this project: (1) to account for the topic’s contemporary context and trajectory, (2) to openly acknowledge presuppositions and subjectivity, (3) to avoid inappropriate totalizing conclusions, (4) to interpret Scripture well and (5) to define its terms properly. These guardrails will not serve as a formal outline, but will be integrated, rather, throughout the discussion.

### **Theology Transcending Culture**

In an attempt to avoid Niebuhr’s mistake of totalizing conclusions, I will not directly import Niebuhr’s five categories into this conversation. Rather, I will rehearse actually existing approaches and will represent each category fairly and succinctly. Michael Stallard’s development of an “Evangelical Theology and Culture” taxonomy resembles this section, though his evaluation of individuals and his final conclusions differ from mine.<sup>38</sup> Helpfully, he calls for a holistic look at the relationship between theology and culture, and suggests a couple of possibilities for why evangelicals

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<sup>38</sup>For example, Stallard groups Millard Erickson squarely as a “transculturalist,” but fails to nuance his position as I will do below. He also places Kevin Vanhoozer in a separate category than the “transculturalists,” even though Vanhoozer’s methodology maintains the objective propositional nature of theology, as do the other “transculturalists” he references. Additionally, in his evaluation of Vanhoozer, Stallard confuses the *creation* of culture with the employment of *existing* culture. In other words, he fails to distinguish between the *impact* of theology on culture—that it changes culture—and the role of existing culture in the theological task. Most significantly his conclusion reflects a simplistic conclusion that fails to account for the possibility that a confessional evangelical would positively appropriate culture in the theological task. Michael Stallard, “Evangelical Theology and Culture: A Taxonomy,” The Evangelical Theological Society, [www.faculty.bbc.edu/rdecker/sub/Stallard04ETSPanel.pdf](http://www.faculty.bbc.edu/rdecker/sub/Stallard04ETSPanel.pdf) (accessed December 12, 2012).

passively have steered clear of examining culture's place in the theological task. In order to explore the engagement of culture as a category within the theological task he surveys three approaches represented by evangelical theologians. I propose a modified taxonomy that will illustrate two clear existing representative paradigms, and also identify an under-articulated third that merits further exploration and clarification, a major contention of this project. To be clear, the success of this argument does not depend necessarily on a complete deconstruction of these representative paradigms. Examining them will clarify the current landscape, providing a helpful starting point from which to clarify the thesis and locate this project in its context. This chapter will conclude by examining this third way and those theologians whose framework is favorable to the thesis that culture positively contributes to the theological task.

The first paradigm emphasizes the unadjusted and transcendental nature of the theological task. This transcendent approach does not dismiss the need for contextualization of propositional content, but seeks to answer universal concerns of humans that have always been true, without concern for the contemporary cultural milieu.<sup>39</sup> In other words, the communication and contextualization of truth demands a basic knowledge of culture, but discovering truth involves no interaction with culture. Discovering the truth about God and the world comes only through study of his word, then application to the world. The transcendental paradigm generally does not fully explore culture when discussing the theological task; it mostly ignores it.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup>David Wells notes, "In the one understanding of contextualization, the revelatory trajectory moves only from authoritative Word into contemporary culture; in the other, the trajectory moves both from text to context and from context to text." David Wells, "The Nature and Function of Theology," in *The Use of the Bible in Theology: Evangelical Options* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1997), 195.

<sup>40</sup>Stallard reveals that older evangelical theologies from 1850–1950 do not include culture *per se* as a serious category in theological formulation. Rather, Charles Hodge, William G. T. Shedd, Augustus Strong, Louis Berkhof, and Lewis Sperry Chafer interact with culture in one way: to confront false views without examining its truth. Michael Stallard, "Evangelical Theology and Culture: A Taxonomy," paper presented at the East Regional of the Evangelical Theological Society (March 26, 2004): 1.

This position is understandable. The goal includes avoiding the influence of the transitory and revising cultural milieu so as to gain as pure a reading of Scriptures as possible.<sup>41</sup> Theologians have often repeated this helpful caution. “We must adapt our communication of theology to our generation but be alert to the great danger of accommodating the message to its errors.”<sup>42</sup> Fulton J. Sheen rightly once said, “He who marries the spirit of the age will become a widower in the age to come.”<sup>43</sup> Indeed, Alexander Campbell articulated this sentiment nicely: “I have endeavored to read the scriptures as though no one had read them before me, and I am as much on my guard against reading them to-day, through the medium of my own views yesterday, or a week ago, as I am against being influenced by any foreign name, authority, or system whatever.”<sup>44</sup> Fighting against the risk of accommodating to culture, this paradigm firmly grasps Scripture as its mooring and views culture as its target.

Charles Hodge strongly exemplifies this paradigm by noting that all the facts of theology were contained in the Scriptures and are to be compiled apart from dialogue

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<sup>41</sup>Indeed, David Clark warns, “The primary common thread shared by these [contemporary] theologies is that each community interprets Christian theology through the grid of its own experience. From an evangelical perspective, the risk is that culture will take the dominant position over Scripture.” Clark, *To Know and Love God*, 45.

<sup>42</sup>Gordon R. Lewis and Bruce A. Demarest, *Integrative Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 1:34.

<sup>43</sup>Quoted in Lewis and Demarest, *Integrative Theology*, 1:34. For examples of those liberation theologians who have married the spirit of the age and are soon to be—if not already—widowers, see Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, trans. and ed. Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1973), and James Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1986). In these examples, the influence of culture comes to the fore and fragments theology in favor of one particular flavor of culture, that of the poor and oppressed. As Clark notes, this fragmentation is expected, assumed and celebrated. Clark, *To Know and Love God*, 45-46. He cites Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite and Mary Potter Engel, *Lift Every Voice: Constructing Christian Theologies from the Underside* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990) as an example.

<sup>44</sup>Alexander Campbell, quoted in Richard Lints, *The Fabric of Theology: A Prolegomenon to Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 102.

with other sources.<sup>45</sup> In an oft-quoted passage, he not only underscores the supreme authority of Scripture but its exclusivity.

The true method of theology, is, therefore, the inductive, which assumes that the Bible contains all the facts of truths which form the contents of theology, just as the facts of nature are the contents of the natural sciences. It is also assumed that the relation of these Biblical facts to each other, the principles involved in them, the laws which determine them, are in the facts themselves, and are to be deduced from them, just as the laws of nature are deduced from the facts of nature.<sup>46</sup>

In this approach, culture is not employed to clarify theology or contribute in methodology, but merely serves as the object of Scripture's application.

At a fundamental level, this is not at odds with confessional evangelicalism, nor is this transcendent view of Scripture fundamentally different from the presuppositions undergirding this project; my contention, refined below, is simply that this approach neglects culture's contribution. My argument that culture positively contributes to the theological task will be constructed from a foundation that assumes Scripture's epistemological supremacy.

### **Theology Embracing Culture**

Whereas the previous school of thought emphasizes the transcendence of Scripture to the exclusion and neglect of culture, others such as Stanley Grenz<sup>47</sup> advocate quite a different approach to culture, that is, its full *integration* into the theological task.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>45</sup>The strength of Hodge's approach, as Clark suggests, is that theology as inductive science preserves an essential value: "that theology must seek a proper form of objectivity." Clark, *To Know and Love God*, 49. Its danger, Clark continues, is that because this model "does not recognize these presuppositions, it actually runs a great risk of allowing a theologian to read a tacitly presupposed theology back into the biblical data." Ibid., 51. To claim an acultural theology is to commit the "fundamentalist fallacy," as Richard Lints puts it. Lints, *The Fabric of Theology*, 8.

<sup>46</sup>Charles Hodge, "Systematic Theology: The Method," in *The Living God*, vol. 1 of *Readings in Christian Theology*, ed. Millard J. Erickson (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1973), 21-28.

<sup>47</sup>Dubbed the "Professor of Postconservatism" by Justin Taylor in the introduction to *Reclaiming the Center: Confronting Evangelical Accommodation in Postmodern Times*, ed. Millard Erickson, Paul Kjoss Helseth, and Justin Taylor (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004), 18.

<sup>48</sup>Though this brief analysis will focus on Grenz, the reader should be advised that George Lindbeck's "cultural-linguistic" methodology has come before him. Lindbeck moves theological authority

A full-scale description and critique of Grenz would require—as Carson has noted<sup>49</sup>—a volume at least as long as his. An introductory summary and critique of his view of culture in the theological task will benefit the reader to discern the difference between Grenz’s conclusions and this current thesis, though the two may apparently employ similar terminology at times.

This school of thought embraces culture not merely as a target for the contextualization of truth but as a critical source in theological formulation. Grenz argues that culture is one of three sources of theology which perichoretically dances alongside Scripture and Tradition. Grenz proposes to bring our understanding of Scripture, cognizance of our heritage and our reading of our cultural context into a creative dialogue.

The theological conversation necessarily entails these three sources because the meaning of cultural symbols changes over time. Thus, the ongoing conversation between the participants in the faith community continually reinterprets the symbols of sacred texts, language, rituals and practices. Grenz traces this need to the rise of postmodernism.

The postmodern turn spells the end of theology. No longer can any one group, tradition, or subnarrative claim without reservation and qualification that their particular doctrinal perspective determines the whole of evangelicalism. Rather, the ongoing evangelical theological task includes (among other endeavors) a never-ending conversation about the meaning, in the contemporary context, of the symbols

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away from Scripture and grounds it in the church. The church as culture uses the Bible to shape Christian identity. Postmodernism has prompted us to accept the subjectivity of the individual human subject’s experience and reasoning. As he put it, “The function of church doctrines . . . is their use, not as expressive symbols or as truth claims, but as communally authoritative rules of discourse, attitude, and action.” See George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984), 18. The connection between Lindbeck and Grenz is widely recognized. *Reclaiming the Center*, for example, targets Grenz’s theological proposal, but boasts thirty distinct references to Lindbeck from six contributors.

<sup>49</sup>D. A. Carson, “Domesticating the Gospel,” in *Reclaiming the Center: Confronting Evangelical Accommodation in Postmodern Times*, ed. Millard Erickson, Paul Kjoss Helseth, and Justin Taylor (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004), 43.

that as evangelicals they are committed to maintaining and that form the carriers of meaning for all.<sup>50</sup>

He continues to propose, “traditionally, evangelicals have self-consciously endeavored to construct systematic theologies largely or exclusively on only one foundation—the Bible.” As Grenz dismisses the Bible as the complete theological foundation—a claim that will be substantiated in what follows—he positions himself starkly against confessional evangelical theology, which has recognized the Bible as the central hallmark of evangelical theology in every generation.<sup>51</sup> Grenz begins with a revision of the doctrines of the inerrancy and authority of Scripture, assigning an esteemed role to culture as the conditioning agent that qualifies Scripture to receive its authoritative status.<sup>52</sup>

The Bible’s authority may be assumed “on the basis of the integral relation of theology to the faith community. Because the Bible is the universally acknowledged book of the Christian church, the biblical message functions as the central norm for the systematic articulation of the faith of that community.” In other words, the employment of the Bible in theological methodology finds its justification in its status as the book of the community. D. A. Carson summarized Grenz’s position by saying that for him the voice of the Bible as primary “must never be thought of as independent of the culturally

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<sup>50</sup>Grenz, *Renewing the Center*, 181. Grenz explains elsewhere, “The specificity of the Spirit’s speaking means that the conversation with cultural context is crucial to the hermeneutical task. We seek to listen to the voice of the Spirit through Scripture as the Spirit speaks to us in the particularity of the historical-cultural context in which we live.” Stanley J. Grenz, “Articulating the Christian Belief-Mosaic,” in *Evangelical Futures*, ed. John G. Stackhouse, Jr. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 127. Conservative evangelicalism would not disagree that the conversation needs to continue as we seek faithfully to interpret and apply Scripture to our contemporary context. However, this idea that the meaning actually changes according to time and context is very different than the idea of contextualization.

<sup>51</sup>Further, Grenz seems to accept readily this conclusion when he says that our age “demands nothing less than a rebirth of theological reflection among evangelicals.” Stanley J. Grenz, *Revisiting Evangelical Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 17.

<sup>52</sup>This view has become outdated, for it fails to account for the social nature of theological discourse. Taylor, *Reclaiming the Center*, 25.

bound situation of the community of readers.”<sup>53</sup> Thus, expressions of the faith made by the church are culturally conditioned; they must be nuanced in each subsequent culture.

Indeed, Grenz notes that “The ultimate authority in the church is the Spirit speaking through Scripture. The Spirit’s speaking through Scripture, however, is always a contextual speaking: it always comes to its hearers within a specific historical-cultural context.”<sup>54</sup> He continues, “the Spirit’s ongoing provision of guidance comes to the community of Christ as a specific people in a specific setting hears the Spirit’s voice speaking in the particularity of its historical-cultural context.”<sup>55</sup> That the Christian community receives so much emphasis is tied to his view that all human knowledge is not objective (in the sense that it is fixed and corresponding to reality), but rather that it is a social construct.<sup>56</sup> Thus, Scripture as a book is not authoritative in itself as God’s Word. Rather, the community has bestowed authority based on it supposing that it “knew these documents were ‘animated with the Spirit of Christ.’”<sup>57</sup>

The apogee of distance between Grenz and Confessional Evangelicalism<sup>58</sup> comes into full view, however, when Grenz calls for “full consideration [of] the historical evangelical assertion that the Bible is the authoritative book of the faith community. What the new theological paradigm requires is a revisioned understanding of the *nature*

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<sup>53</sup>Carson, “Domesticating the Gospel,” 37.

<sup>54</sup>Grenz, *Renewing the Center*, 209.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid.

<sup>56</sup>Carson, “Domesticating the Gospel,” 51.

<sup>57</sup>Stanley Grenz and John Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000), 65.

<sup>58</sup>Indeed, Carson commented, “Grenz’s reformulation of the doctrine of Scripture is so domesticated by postmodern relativism that it stands well and truly outside the evangelical camp.” Carson, “Domesticating the Gospel,” *Reclaiming the Center*, 50.

of the Bible's authority."<sup>59</sup> He continues to propose that evangelicals cannot simply construct theology on the foundation of the Bible.<sup>60</sup>

No longer can the theologian focus merely on Scripture as the one complete theological norm. Instead, the process of contextualization requires a movement between two poles—the Bible as the source of truth and the culture as the source of the categories through which the theologian expresses biblical truth. Of course, Scripture remains the primary source and norm for theological statements. Nevertheless, contextualization demands that the theologian take seriously the thought-forms and mindset of the culture in which theologizing transpires, in order to explicate the eternal truths of the Scriptures in language that is understandable to contemporary people.<sup>61</sup>

Strangely enough, in the ongoing legacy of the Reformation (as he claims), Grenz recognizes the Bible's supreme authority in the theological task;<sup>62</sup> but he strips credibility from his assertion attributing authority to Scripture with statements like this: "Because the expressions of the faith made by the church are culturally conditioned, they must be nuanced."<sup>63</sup> The Bible was composed and collected by the early church; thus, its claims essentially have a qualified relevance for us today. Grenz begins with a revision of the doctrines of the inerrancy and authority of Scripture, assigning an esteemed role to culture as the conditioning agent that qualifies Scripture to receive its authoritative status.

Thus, Grenz finds the proofs of externally verifiable miracles, fulfilled prophecies and the Bible's own claims about itself as unnecessary.<sup>64</sup> The Bible's authority may be assumed "on the basis of the integral relation of theology to the faith community. Because the Bible is the universally acknowledged book of the Christian church, the biblical message functions as the central norm for the systematic articulation of the faith

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<sup>59</sup>Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology*, 88.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid., 89.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid., 90.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid., 93.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid., 95.

<sup>64</sup>Ibid., 94.



of that community.” Again, the employment of the Bible as a theological norm finds its justification in its status as the book of the community.

Consequently, Scripture and culture are epistemologically congruous. Hearing truth through other media does not speak against the text of Scripture. Grenz agrees that though we are listening from within a particular historical-cultural context, the biblical text provides the only sure canon for truth. While upholding the supremacy of Scripture with one hand, he also states that “culture and biblical text do not comprise two different moments of communication; rather, they are but one speaking. And consequently we do not engage in two different ‘listening,’ but one. We listen for the voice of the spirit who speaks the Word through the word within the particularity of the hearers’ context, and who thereby can speak in all things, albeit always according to the Word who is Christ.”<sup>65</sup> So, when Grenz calls the theologian to listen to culture, he is doing so with a framework that places culture in a first-level category of authority.

Grenz’s postmodern epistemology drives his theological methodology into relativism; however, Grenz cannot account for how Scripture can be ultimately authoritative in light of its supposed communal grounding. The Christian community upholds Scripture as authoritative, but a Muslim community would disagree.<sup>66</sup> Which community is correct? Only one can be correct if truth is objective. Both can be correct only if truth is relative. Furthermore, how can Grenz claim that Scripture is epistemologically congruous with error-prone human culture without also stripping Scripture of its objective authority? He cannot; in his framework objective authority outside the authentication of local communities is impossible.

His epistemological framework informs his readers as to what he means when he encourages us to listen to culture. Grenz’ argument that the theological enterprise is

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<sup>65</sup>Grenz, *Renewing the Center*, 210-11.

<sup>66</sup>Carson, “Domesticating the Gospel,” 54.

informed by contemporary knowledge—from various anthropological sciences—surely is warranted.<sup>67</sup> No discipline is purely secular.<sup>68</sup> God is the ground of all truth, and all truth belongs to him. The theological enterprise looks to all human knowledge because all human knowledge comes from God and points to God.<sup>69</sup> Grenz dramatically departs, however, from Scripture’s own teaching concerning itself and human culture when he places them on an equal epistemological playing field. This maneuver reverses the accepted evangelical method of moving from first-order Scripture as interpretative framework to second-order theological construction.<sup>70</sup> In the end, it leaves us with

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<sup>67</sup>“In the conversation about the big questions that humans face, we can expect not only to offer our perspective as Christians but also to gain insights from other participants that will trigger deeper understandings of the Christian belief-mosaic itself. The theological basis for such an expectation takes us back to the Spirit who speaks. In contrast to those Christians who assume that the church is the *only* location in which the Holy Spirit is operative, the biblical writers display a broad understanding of the Spirit’s presence, a presence connected to the Spirit’s role as the life giver (Gen. 1:2; 2:7) and life sustainer (Ps. 104:29-30; Isa. 32:15). Because the life-giving Spirit is present wherever life flourishes, and Spirit-induced human flourishing evokes cultural expression, Christians can anticipate hearing overtones of the Spirit’s voice in many media, including human culture. I must quickly add, however, that the Spirit speaking in the Bible offers the only sure canon for hearing the spirit in culture, because the Spirit’s speaking everywhere and anywhere is always in concert with this primary speaking in Scripture.” Stanley Grenz, “How Do We Know What to Believe? Revelation and Authority,” in *Essentials of Christian Theology*, ed. William Placher (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 32.

<sup>68</sup>“This hermeneutical process occurs in part as contemporary ‘knowledge’—the discoveries and insights of the various disciplines of human learning—informs our theological construction. For example, theories about addictions and addictive behavior can provide insight into the biblical teaching about sin. Likewise, current discoveries about the process of human identity formation can lead to a deeper or wider awareness of the many dimensions entailed in the new identity the Spirit seeks to create in us through our union with Christ. Our theological reflections can draw from the so-called secular sciences, because ultimately no discipline is in fact purely secular.” Stanley J. Grenz, “Articulating the Christian Belief-Mosaic,” in *Evangelical Futures*, ed. John G. Stackhouse, Jr. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 127.

<sup>69</sup>Grenz, *Renewing the Center*, 210.

<sup>70</sup>Stephen J. Wellum, “Postconservatism, Biblical Authority, and Recent Proposals for Re-Doing Evangelical Theology: A Critical Analysis,” in *Reclaiming the Center*, 173. Wellum also notes Lints, *Fabric of Theology*; Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “From Canon to Concept: ‘Same’ and ‘Other’ in the Relation of Biblical and Systematic Theology,” *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 12 (1994): 96-124; and Michael S. Horton, *Covenant and Eschatology: The Divine Drama* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002).

Vanhoozer discusses a similar point elsewhere: “doctrine is a ‘second-order’ formulation of something ‘first-order,’ be it biblical propositions, Jesus’ person, Christian piety, or church practices.” Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 4-7.

subjectivism that cannot ground a normative evangelical theology.<sup>71</sup> The dangerous consequence of elevating subjective culture to the role of that which determines what is God's Word is the compromise of truth itself.

For what benefit does Grenz seem to be calling for a revisioning of Scripture's authority and consequently evangelical theological method? At times, he seems to be directing his conclusions toward the process of contextualizing. For example, he suggests, "theologians have an ongoing task of listening to culture. Only by so doing are they able to construct theologies that can assist the church in formulating its message in a manner than can speak within the historical-social context."<sup>72</sup> This statement speaks to theological articulation, not interpretation. Grenz warns that biblicists run the risk of articulating the faith in language that is not understandable to the contemporary world.<sup>73</sup> He also warns that, as messengers, we must be sure that the stumbling block is the absurdity of the cross and not the opaqueness of the categories we employ.<sup>74</sup> Agreed. His warning is correct because we do not live in the ancient world, but in this context; we cannot simply repeat the theological declarations of a previous era. We "seek to understand the revelation of God mediated through the biblical writers for *our* context and *our* world."<sup>75</sup> He is right to stress the importance of contextualization, but he wrongly assumes that we cannot do this by beginning with the Bible. Critiquing this idea, he states, "Beginning with the Bible means focusing our theologizing toward the goal of discovering the system of doctrine found in its pages."<sup>76</sup> To be sure, though the goal of

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<sup>71</sup>Wellum, "Postconservatism," 192.

<sup>72</sup>Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology*, 99.

<sup>73</sup>Ibid., 102.

<sup>74</sup>Ibid.

<sup>75</sup>Stanley Grenz, *Who Needs Theology? An Invitation to the Study of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996), 107.

<sup>76</sup>Ibid., 109.

theology cannot be reduced to merely a “system of doctrine,” theology does begin by discovering what God says. This exegetical discovering is problematic for Grenz because of his optimistic view of community and its authoritative status that his postmodern framework requires.

Grenz’ position is not novel. In a similar manner as Grenz, Robert Schreiter argues that the theologian’s task involves listening to culture.<sup>77</sup> He also seems to be concerned about contextualization, but—like Grenz—he takes it much farther than simply articulating truth in contemporary language. “Local theology”—as Schreiter describes it—incorporates the dynamic interaction between gospel, church and culture.<sup>78</sup> As the theologian listens to culture, he approaches culture with openness and sensitivity, “finding Christ in the situation rather than concentrating on bringing Christ into the situation.”<sup>79</sup> Based on the theology of the incarnation, the theologian risks introducing and maintaining Christianity as an alien body in a culture.<sup>80</sup> In other words, for Schreiter, Christianity is not as much an introduction of new ideas or life patterns into a culture reflecting brokenness and despair, but an affirmation of that culture’s current autonomous status.

Schreiter’s bold statements, which result in a redefinition of Christ, appear to be driven more by the perceived need to be relevant and integrated than truthful and transformative. How and where Schreiter is intending to develop and apply the “theology of the incarnation” in his conversation is not clear. He simply does not explain. An initial and cursory glance at the New Testament record of Jesus’ life, however, does not prompt one primarily to embrace current thought forms and find the Jesus of culture, but to

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<sup>77</sup>Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1985), 39-74.

<sup>78</sup>Ibid., 1-21.

<sup>79</sup>Ibid., 39.

<sup>80</sup>Ibid.

change the current thought forms and discover the Christ of Scripture.<sup>81</sup> This quest for relevancy at the price of compromise appears to drive Grenz in this direction, as well.

“Our doctrine—as biblical as it may appear to be—may in the end be irrelevant to the world in which God calls us to live as disciples. In short, our attempt to construct a *biblical* theology may short-circuit our attempt to construct a biblical *theology*.”<sup>82</sup> This danger drives Grenz to consider beginning with culture, namely first seeking to hear the spiritual cries of the contemporary world.<sup>83</sup> “The manner in which the one faith of the church is understood and conceptualized will always be related in some way to the context in which the performing, theologizing community is situated. For this reason, culture must be viewed as a resource for theology.”<sup>84</sup> Grenz justifies the integration of culture into the theological task by appealing to the importance of relevance and contextualization. This appeal is a basic category mistake that equivocates contextualization of scriptural content with exegesis of scriptural content.

The particular embodiment and formation of the spiritual cries that Scripture identifies *can* be seen in culture, but this embodiment of what Scripture has already claimed does not vault culture ahead of or even alongside Scripture as first-order theological language. As will be demonstrated below, culture is second-order language that is ancillary to Scripture.

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<sup>81</sup>On five occasions in Matthew Jesus challenged his hearers: “You have heard that it was said, but I say unto you.” Jesus’ forerunner, John the Baptist, preached a message of repentance, and was thoroughly countercultural. The relevancy of the gospel message was not contingent on finding the Christ that was among them, but on presenting the Christ that had come to them.

<sup>82</sup>Grenz, *Who Needs Theology?* 110.

<sup>83</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>84</sup>Grenz, “How Do We Know What to Believe?” 30.

## Theology Employing Culture

Others have entertained the possibility of a third way, neither waging war nor inviting culture to the dinner table. Indeed, several evangelical theologians suggest that Scripture possesses transcendent authority over culture, but they also open the door to the complementary though ancillary epistemological value of culture.

Theologians such as Kevin Vanhoozer, for example, emphasize the absolute and universal nature of the theological task, but see the importance of a theological construction's interconnectivity with itself as a whole and the world as its target. In other words, theology not only transcends culture, but it transforms it. "Studying biblical words and concepts takes us only so far. It is one thing to know how a biblical author spoke or thought about a particular issue in the context of ancient Israel or the early church, quite another to relate those words and thoughts about a particular issue to the message of the Bible as a whole and to the significance of the Bible's teaching for us today."<sup>85</sup> His proposal does not merely recognize the need for contextualization, but it employs the discipline of hermeneutics as a means to construct culture.<sup>86</sup>

In other words, the task of theological application includes creating culture as its goal. Understanding leads to performance. Right interpretation necessarily entails performing Scripture. For Vanhoozer, the performance of Scripture is just as important as its exegesis.

The creation of culture as a part or result of the theological task certainly merits further consideration.<sup>87</sup> But this dissertation is more concerned with justifying the contention that the theologian should see value of incorporating into the theological task

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<sup>85</sup>Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "The Voice of the Actor: A Dramatic Proposal about the Ministry and Minstrelsy of Theology," in *Evangelical Futures*, ed. John G. Stackhouse, Jr. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 62.

<sup>86</sup>Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *First Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002), 332.

<sup>87</sup>Though not directly in the genre of theological methodology, this task has been taken up by Andy Crouch, *Culture Making* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2008).

extant culture. Nonetheless, Vanhoozer's comments are helpful. If he is correct, that theology transforms culture, then the study of that theologically transformed culture should yield theological fruit. Vanhoozer appears to agree with this conclusion, contending in *Everyday Theology* for the theological value of cultural exegesis.<sup>88</sup>

In the opening chapter of *Everyday Theology* he contends that theologians must learn to read culture "not least because it has become an important locus of everyday theology."<sup>89</sup> This enterprise helps to identify and reject the cleverly devised myths according to the pattern of this world (2 Pet 1:16; Rom 12:2), but also helps to identify and accept correct thinking and living patterns.

The employment of culture also fits loosely with Millard Erickson's seventh step in theological methodology, "illumination from extrabiblical sources." Characteristic of evangelical theological methodology, Erickson suggests that the actual task of doing theology should follow a logical order of development that reflects the priority of Scripture. He states that the Bible is systematic theology's major source, but that it is not the only one. In addition to employing special revelation the theologian should also employ general revelation. In other words, because divine revelation is not limited to Scripture it can be employed in a way that is subservient to Scripture, insofar as that revelation retains truth-value. Erickson further notes that general revelation is helpful "when it sheds light on the special revelation or fills it out at certain points where it does not speak."<sup>90</sup>

Whereas Erickson merely speaks of *general revelation* as a complementary companion to special revelation, I will argue below that *culture* should also be a complementary companion book to Scripture. In a similar way that general revelation is

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<sup>88</sup>Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Everyday Theology: How to Read Cultural Texts and Interpret Trends*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer et al. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007).

<sup>89</sup>Ibid., 33-34.

<sup>90</sup>Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 75.

complementary to Scripture, culture is complementary to Scripture, though its employment requires careful nuance because of the multifaceted impact of the Fall.

Wayne Grudem is another evangelical theologian whose methodology seems open to the contribution of culture. He employs a theological method that is similar to Hodge when he defines “systematic theology,” though ultimately Grudem stands distinct from Hodge.<sup>91</sup> For Grudem, systematic theology is entirely transcendent, insofar as it is “any study that answers the question, ‘What does the whole Bible teach us today?’ about any given topic.”<sup>92</sup> Where Grudem differs from Hodge, however, is that he commends other theological disciplines as aids in the theological task; namely, historical theology, philosophical theology and apologetics. The Bible is the final authority, but Grudem suggests that the theologian can interact rightly with culture under the rubric *philosophical theology*, which “helps us understand right and wrong thought forms common in our culture and others.”<sup>93</sup> He suggests that whereas philosophical studies “do contribute to our understanding of theological questions, only Scripture has the final authority to define what we are to believe. . . .”<sup>94</sup> Thus, *systematic theology* only looks to the Bible, but the broader theological task incorporates insight from other venues.<sup>95</sup> Grudem never articulates his position as fully consonant with the thesis of this dissertation, but his broader definition of the theological task seems to permit its plausibility.

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<sup>91</sup>See Wayne Grudem, “Do We Act As If We Really Believe that ‘the Bible Alone, and the Bible in Its Entirety, Is the Word of God Written?’” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 43 (March, 2000): 5-26, and idem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995).

<sup>92</sup>Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 21.

<sup>93</sup>Ibid., 22.

<sup>94</sup>Ibid.

<sup>95</sup>Ibid. Grudem also notes that if someone prefers to use the term *systematic theology* in a broader sense instead of the narrow sense it will not make much difference.



Gordon Lewis and Bruce Demarest also address the relationship of Scripture and culture in a complementary manner:

The immediate issues of a given culture provide valuable conversational starting points, but the study of each basic Christian doctrine begins with a problem of permanent, transcultural significance. A theological treatment of the multitudes of specific issues in each culture and subculture is important, but that can best be done by Christians who have specialized in the areas of the sciences, history, psychology, sociology, etc. Furthermore multitudes of contemporary issues may pass out of date almost as quickly as daily newspapers. The classical issues and doctrines have exhibited universal and permanent relevance because they are common to all men and women from the Near East, the Far East, and the West, in the two-thirds world and the one-third world, in rural areas and the large cities.<sup>96</sup>

Employing the verificational method, they suggest that genuine inquiry begins with defining an issue that is often motivated by “enigmatic and even traumatic experiences in life.”<sup>97</sup> In other words, doctrinal inquiry is prompted by existential realities then proceeds to examine Scripture for its answer.<sup>98</sup> For example, a mom and dad whose 2-year-old daughter died in an automobile accident might be prompted to look to God’s Word for answers to this tragedy. Throughout their multi-volume *Integrative Theology* Lewis and Demarest endorse and emphasize the transcendent authority of Scripture. They root its transcendent authority in its divine nature: “Just as Jesus Christ was truly divine and truly human without sin, so the Scriptures are truly divine and truly human without error.”<sup>99</sup> To stress the universal impact of divine authorship and universal truthfulness of Scripture,

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<sup>96</sup>Gordon R. Lewis and Bruce A. Demarest, *Integrative Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 1:9-10.

<sup>97</sup>Ibid., 1:37-38.

<sup>98</sup>This approach is not too far removed from Paul Tillich’s “method of correlation,” which suggests that philosophy asks the questions and theology provides the answers. See Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951–1963), 1:1-28, 66-68. Clark summarizes Tillich’s contribution here: “The method of correlation requires theology to achieve an organic relation between the existential question developed through philosophical analysis and the Christian answer produced through theological reflection.” David Clark, *To Know and Love God*, in *Foundations of Evangelical Theology*, ed. John S. Feinberg (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2003), 44.

<sup>99</sup>Lewis and Demarest, *Integrative Theology*, 1:162.

the authors write, “The Bible’s teachings are objectively normative for all people of all times and cultures whether these teachings are received or not.”<sup>100</sup>

Their discussion of culture in the theological task extends further, however. Culture is not merely theology’s target. Lewis and Demarest leave the door open to cultural investigation in the theological task when they suggest that insightful answers to issues may come independently of historical and scriptural evidence.<sup>101</sup> Scripture transcends culture in epistemological value, though it does not negate it. They “affirm that although there are many sources of theological knowledge, there is but one inerrant, final authority: *sola scriptura*.”<sup>102</sup> They helpfully emphasize that these insights discovered outside of Scripture must “fit together into a consistent whole that squares with Scripture and reality as we face it daily. Carefully interpreted scriptural teaching must test intuitions, not the other way around (1 John 4:1-3).”<sup>103</sup>

Though the Bible is the objective standard of truth for all people of all time, even those cultures without the Bible possess common ground with the Bible. “Christians speaking up for their faith may count on common ground as did Paul, the apostle to the pagans (non-theistic Gentiles) at Athens. . . . with pre-theists and pre-Christians he reasoned out of God’s revelation in nature history, and the human heart.”<sup>104</sup> With general revelation—though misunderstood and suppressed—as common ground, “Paul at Athens established the truth about God as Creator and as giver of the moral law by recovering distorted common ground in the writings of one of the Stoic pantheists’ own poets ([Acts

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<sup>100</sup>Ibid., 1:163.

<sup>101</sup>Ibid., 1:39.

<sup>102</sup>Ibid., 1:34.

<sup>103</sup>Ibid., 1:39. Though the authors’ immediate caution pertains to intuition, the principle equally applies to culture as a discussion point.

<sup>104</sup>Ibid., 1:88.

17] v. 28).”<sup>105</sup> Christian missionaries doing theology “need general revelation for points of contact with people in every culture on earth.”<sup>106</sup> That most cultures would punish murderers such as Ted Bundy and heap accolades on philanthropists such as Mother Theresa provides the missionary with a common ground connection. This affords the missionary with the opportunity to complete the general revelation content of human dignity and the virtuous nature of generosity with special revelation’s grounding of these things in God himself. Lewis and Demarest favorably quote B. B. Warfield, who saw general and special revelation’s relationship not in sheer contrast and opposition, but “rather one of supplement and completion.”<sup>107</sup> Given the definition of culture defined in a later chapter, which demonstrates that culture necessarily includes general revelation in its content, Lewis and Demarest’s framework seems to be open to culture’s contribution to the theological task.<sup>108</sup>

Richard Lints helps to clarify this juxtaposition of theology and culture. In one sense, theology stands above cultures because the transcendent and eternal Author of truth stands above cultures. In another sense, theology moves through cultures because the transcendent and eternal Author has chosen to reveal himself to mankind in time and space. Richard Lints writes, “The trajectory of the divine revelation in this sense moves from the original divine disclosures through human history toward the end of time: it

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<sup>105</sup>Ibid., 1:88.

<sup>106</sup>Ibid., 1:89. The authors continue: “But since general revelation is law, not gospel, every missionary urgently needs to preach the good news of grace in Christ, not the message of salvation by works.”

<sup>107</sup>Quoted in Lewis and Demarest, *Integrative Theology*, 1:89.

<sup>108</sup>Along with Lit-sen Chang—whom Lewis and Demarest also favorably quote—general revelation is absolutely insufficient for salvation, but it “has certain value for the Christian religions, and . . . there is a close relationship between the two [general and special revelation].” Quoted in Lewis and Demarest, *Integrative Theology*, 1:90.

moves *through* cultures, not above or beyond them.”<sup>109</sup> Whereas the Scripture stands fixed and unadjusted, its meaning is clarified and lived within the human experience of culture.

In Lints’ framework, culture’s contribution can be accepted while simultaneously embracing the transcendent epistemological authority of Scripture. “The meaning of revelation can be ascertained with the aid of the conversation that takes place between the Bible and my experience within a particular culture, but it is the biblical revelation that possesses the unique authority to challenge and transform my culture-bound experience.”<sup>110</sup> The epistemological mooring of Scripture challenges the postmodern sensibility, which rejects the notion of a universal or totalizing metanarrative. The totalizing metanarrative itself is that which, in fact, makes sense of individual narratives. “The cognitive horizon of the interpreter must be prescribed and thereby challenged by the meaning of the biblical revelation.”<sup>111</sup> In other words, Scripture’s transcendent epistemological authority makes possible the profitability of the study of culture.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, this dissertation stands with each of the theologians above as pertains to the authority of Scripture, with the exception of Grenz and Schreier. This dissertation depends on the assumption that the supremely authoritative nature of Scripture is settled—not because it was one culture’s sourcebook of knowledge of God—because of Scripture’s divine origin, its self-authentication that corresponds to reality and

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<sup>109</sup>Lints, *Fabric of Theology*, 114.

<sup>110</sup>Ibid., 115. Lints also quotes C. René Padilla favorably: “To be valid and appropriate, [theology] must reflect the merging of the horizons of the historical situation and the horizons of the text.” C. René Padilla, “Hermeneutics and Culture—A Theological Perspective,” in *Down to Earth: Studies in Christianity and Culture*, ed. John R. W. Stott and Robert Coote (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 73.

<sup>111</sup>Lints, *Fabric of Theology*, 115.

the inner witness of the Spirit.<sup>112</sup> In other words, the true expressions of the faith made by members of the church in the Bible are not culturally contingent; they are breathed out by God and transcend the limitations characteristic of each subculture whether or not its members recognize it.

This dissertation coheres with Vanhoozer's contention that the theologian should learn to read culture because it is an important locus of everyday theology. It also coheres with Erickson's contention that general revelation is a complementary companion to Scripture.<sup>113</sup> It coheres with Grudem's contention that the broad theological task incorporates insight from other venues than just Scripture. It coheres with Lewis and Demarest's contention that the biblicist possesses common ground points-of-contact with a pre-theist, and benefits from a close relationship between general and special revelation. It coheres with Lints' contention that theology moves *through* cultures, not above or beyond them. My point is not that each of these theologians would agree unequivocally with this dissertation's conclusions. The point of this brief survey has been to locate this dissertation as one that fits within the general framework of confessional evangelicalism as these have articulated.

This dissertation aligns with Hodge in that the propositional truths of Scripture transcend culture. Deconstructing the transcendentalist paradigm is not in the primary interests or scope of this project; in fact, the transcendentalist paradigm provides some valuable foundational insights from which the argument will be constructed for the contribution of culture to the theological task. This dissertation agrees that Scripture possesses permanence and relevance in all times and cultures and that in many cases it confronts culture; its addition to Hodge is that culture transmits revelatory content with a

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<sup>112</sup>Indeed, as Wellum has argued, Grenz and Franke's view of Scripture "does not do justice to what the Bible claims for itself and, therefore, it greatly weakens the grounding for doing theology in any kind of normative fashion." Wellum, "Postconservatism," 188-89.

<sup>113</sup>As I will argue below, culture's epistemological content necessarily includes general revelation, though it has coursed through a truth-suppressing human agent.

second-order value that subserviently serves Scripture by demonstrating observably its truth claims. Though theology transcends culture and even confronts much of culture, the theological enterprise can employ culture in a positive yet discerning way that reflects neither wholesale dismissal nor embrace.

Though some statements in this proposal may sound similar to Grenz, the proposal stands far from him because of the worldview context from which the statements come. The authoritative nature of Scripture is settled because of its divine inspiration; this consideration changes everything. Scripture's source of authority impacts every discussion about Scripture. That culture offers a contribution to the theological task is unique because it is presented from a decisively conservative, confessional evangelical perspective.<sup>114</sup> Self-authenticating Scripture undergirds the epistemological framework here that recognizes the contribution of culture to the theological task.

This conversation clarifies the distance between this proposal and Grenz's. To make these claims of scriptural authority does not deny the hermeneutical spiral<sup>115</sup> in which interpretation involves the back and forth between presuppositions and text, but suggests that the revelatory trajectory is unidirectional.<sup>116</sup> When Scripture and culture collide, Scripture is the conclusively clarifying authority that exposes the corruption of culture; but Grenz cannot say this. "So eager is Grenz to avoid saying that what the Bible says at any point is *true* or *authoritative* or *binding* that the most he can affirm is that the Bible is our 'primary communication partner.'"<sup>117</sup> As Grenz has suggested, his doctrine

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<sup>114</sup>See R. Albert Mohler, "Confessional Evangelical," in *Four Views on the Spectrum of Evangelicalism*, ed. Andrew David Naselli (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011).

<sup>115</sup>Indeed, Carson notes that various scholars have developed the idea that "notwithstanding the genuine gains in humility brought about by postmodernism, finite human beings may be said to know some things truly even if nothing absolutely/omnisciently." Interestingly, Grenz never addresses this literature. Carson, "Domesticating the Gospel," 47.

<sup>116</sup>Lints, *Fabric of Theology*, 115.

<sup>117</sup>Carson, "Domesticating the Gospel," 49.

of Scripture could lead us easily to take our agenda from culture rather than from God. Mankind's blindness would naturally lead him to fail to see or embrace the fullness of truth. In effect, when we exchange the authority of Scripture for the lesser authority of man we have lost the gospel.<sup>118</sup>

Thus, this paradigm stands distinct from Grenz because it affirms that "the anxiety created by reading a discomfiting passage is often a healthy sign: it suggests that a corrupting cultural predisposition is being revealed for what it is."<sup>119</sup> This dissertation coheres with Bavinck's contention that "if the gospel is true, then it carries with it its own standard for the valuation of all culture."<sup>120</sup> The temptation to syncretize the gospel with culture must be combatted; the best way to combat the temptation is not to bury our heads, but to expose honestly our cultural predispositions with the intent of examining them under the rubric of Scripture.<sup>121</sup> P. T. Forsyth provides a helpful way forward. "Christianity can endure, not by surrendering itself to the modern mind and modern

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<sup>118</sup>"Take the biblical concept of sin as an example. We ought to speak of sin in culturally sensitive ways. Hence, we might draw on findings in psychology to speak about the addictive aspect of sin. Or we may borrow the language of 'failure.' Making such connections facilitates us in articulating a culturally constructive theology. But we dare not buy into the trend to jettison the concept of personal responsibility and accountability. If we excuse culpable conduct because the perpetrators were themselves 'victims,' we are no longer talking about what the Bible calls 'sin.' We have lost the gospel." Grenz, *Who Needs Theology?* 111-12.

<sup>119</sup>Lints, *Fabric of Theology*, 116. "Another part of the intended goal of constructing a theological framework is the demythologization of modern culture. The myths of modern culture are exposed and unmasked for what they are only in the light of divine revelation. . . . The end result is that the community is to be freed not from the demands of the gospel but from the distortions of modern culture."

<sup>120</sup>Herman Bavinck, *Philosophy of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953), 256.

<sup>121</sup>"Christians are never safe from the temptation to link the gospel in some fashion with the cultural values of their own time. Reflecting on the historical origins of such values and ideals may help us to identify some of the formative cultural elements that have shaped and/or distorted our understanding of God and his revelation and thus may help us begin to distinguish between what is normative for all time and what is time-bound." Lints, *Fabric of Theology*, 96. The gospel according to the Feminist movement comes to mind as an example. The gospel is not liberation from sexual mores and gender-role traditions that have shackled women through the centuries, but forgiveness of sin, reconciliation with God, and restoration of the Image of God as strangers are adopted into God's family.

culture, but rather by a break with it: the condition of a long future both for culture and the soul is the Christianity which antagonizes culture without denying its place.”<sup>122</sup>

Approaching culture in this way requires faith that seeks to make theological sense of everyday life. Jesus confronted the Jewish leaders of his day when they failed to discern God’s presence in their midst. He replied to their request for a sign.

He answered them, “When it is evening, you say, ‘It will be fair weather, for the sky is red.’ And in the morning, ‘It will be stormy today, for the sky is red and threatening.’ You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times. An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah.” So he left them and departed (Matt 16:2-4).

Jesus criticized their ability to read natural signs while simultaneously demonstrating illiteracy when it came to cultural and theological signs. Though Jesus’ rebuke was directed at the Jewish leaders, his warning should be heeded today. We should also be “alive and awake to what God is doing in our own time through the Spirit of Jesus Christ.”<sup>123</sup> The danger of not being aware of where God is working, or of the world, is that we would be “tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes” (Eph 4:14). To grow up into Christ we should make every effort to discern Christ and the reception or rejection of truth in culture. Moving forward in this direction compels us to define carefully “the theological task” and “culture.

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<sup>122</sup>P. T. Forsyth, *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind* (London: Independent, 1960), 89.

<sup>123</sup>Vanhoozer, *Everyday Theology*, 17.



## CHAPTER 3

### CULTURE

#### **Introduction**

The value of culture's definition to this dissertation is inestimable; the challenge of defining culture is also preeminently formidable. In brief, herein lies the purpose of this chapter: to sort through the complication of culture's definition by discovering consensus among anthropologists and most importantly by defining "culture" in its proper biblical-theological perspective.

In his work focusing on the sociology of language, Raymond Williams wrote, "the word 'culture' is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language."<sup>1</sup> Despite its complexity, every attempt at explaining the things relating to culture depends upon a proper definition of culture.

At the onset of the discussion, the commonly used phrase "popular culture" clouds the discussion. How does this phrase "popular culture" fit into this attempt at defining culture? When many authors discuss the topic of culture, they automatically include "popular culture" as one type of culture, or even use the two terms synonymously. To what definition of culture does this project pertain: culture that is popular or not?

For all of the interest and clamor surrounding popular culture, "one of the striking features of much of the literature on theology, religion and popular culture is that 'popular culture' is rarely defined. Yet far from being a simple or uncontested term, the

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<sup>1</sup>"This is so partly because of its intricate historical development, in several European languages, but mainly because it has now come to be used for important concepts in several distinct intellectual disciplines and in several distinct and incompatible systems of thought." Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 87.

nature of ‘popular culture’ has been the focus of fierce academic and cultural debate.”<sup>2</sup> The debate is not unwarranted. Cultural theorist Stuart Hall once remarked, “I have almost as many problems with ‘popular’ as I have with ‘culture.’ When you put the two terms together the difficulties can be pretty horrendous.”<sup>3</sup> Who or what determines its popularity?<sup>4</sup> Is that culture which is popular positively cultivating and exhibiting the best in the spirit of mankind, as the historic understanding of culture has been?<sup>5</sup> Thus, is it truly culture if it fails to accomplish this? Popular culture is not a concept whose meaning is agreed upon by everyone who claims to study it, nor is it an object that is readily quantifiable and testable.<sup>6</sup> Despite popular culture’s definitional challenges, James Clifford described it as a deeply compromised idea that he cannot yet do without.<sup>7</sup> It seems to be an idea that he cannot do without because it is a reality that no one can ignore.

Gordon Lynch provides a way forward by helpfully identifying three key ways in which “popular culture” has been defined: (1) as an opposing cultural form to *high*

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<sup>2</sup>Gordon Lynch, *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), xii.

<sup>3</sup>Stuart Hall, “Notes on Deconstructing ‘the Popular,’” in *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*, ed. John Storey (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1998), 442.

<sup>4</sup>Turnau helpfully suggests that we must be careful with our usage of the term “popular”; “widespreadness” does not capture what we mean by popular culture. He attributes the recent phenomenon of non-widespread popular culture to new media technologies and marketing strategies that “narrowcast” culture into fragmented niche markets. Theodore A. Turnau, *Popologetics: Popular Culture in Christian Perspective* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2012), 3-7.

<sup>5</sup>Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy* (1869), explains that culture is that which is best in human thought, action, and speech. Bavinck accords with this traditional understanding of culture when he states that “The Christian nations are still the guardians of culture.” Herman Bavinck, *Philosophy of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953), 269.

<sup>6</sup>Lynch, *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture*, 2.

<sup>7</sup>James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 10.

*culture or the avant-garde.*<sup>8</sup> (2) As a category that is defined in relation to both *high culture* and *folk culture*, or which is seen as displacing *folk culture*.<sup>9</sup> (3) As a form of social and cultural resistance against *dominant culture* or *mass culture*. In each case, it seems, popular culture is parasitic, feeding off of a pre-existing classification of culture, whether mass, folk or avant-garde. Though perhaps not quite so negatively as I have stated, Storey would agree: “Part of the difficulty stems from the implied *otherness* which is always absent/present when we use the term ‘popular culture’ . . . [P]opular culture is always defined, implicitly or explicitly, in contrast to other conceptual categories: folk culture, mass culture, dominant culture, working-class culture, etc . . . Moreover . . . whichever conceptual category is deployed as popular culture’s absent/present *other*, it will always powerfully affect the connotations brought into play when we use the term ‘popular culture.’”<sup>10</sup> Clement Greenberg expressed his resentment of popular culture such, “It borrows from it devices, tricks, stratagems, rules of thumb, themes, converts them into a system, and discards the rest.”<sup>11</sup>

What, then, is popular culture? For both supporters and detractors of popular culture, that which informs the definition of “popular culture” is the definition of culture itself. In other words, popular culture has no existence apart from culture. That popular culture is located as one type of culture broadly defined, most would agree. Doubtless, a universally agreed upon definition and value of popular culture would be impossible.

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<sup>8</sup>Lynch notes important figures in this regard being British writers Matthew Arnold and F. R. Leavis, as well as American critics such as Clement Greenberg and Dwight McDonald. Lynch, *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture*, 4.

<sup>9</sup>Lynch identifies Bruce Forbes and Jeffrey Mahan as two who take this approach. It is a triangular distinction between a gourmet meal, grandma’s casserole and McDonald’s hamburger. It pays close attention to the size of audience and means by which cultural is transmitted. Lynch, *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture*, 8.

<sup>10</sup>John Storey, “What is Popular Culture,” in *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*, 1.

<sup>11</sup>Clement Greenburg, “Avante-Garde and Kitsch,” *Partisan Review* 6, no. 5 (1939): 34-49, quoted in Ken Myers, *All God’s Children and Blue Suede Shoes* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 70.

Even one of the foremost evangelical critics of popular culture, Ken Myers, would likely concede that popular culture is still a type of culture, even though it is not culture as he would prefer to define it. He essentially argues that popular culture is neither popular nor culture, insofar as culture was meant to be in the beginning.<sup>12</sup> “Popular culture is trickle-down culture, consumed by the populace, but not initiated by them.”<sup>13</sup> As such, in Myers’ estimation, it fails to qualify as culture at all.<sup>14</sup> His criticism that popular culture has degenerated from what God has intended culture to be from the beginning is well stated. He would have us to be particularly cautious of popular culture because of its inferiority to the way that culture should be.<sup>15</sup> Though he sufficiently criticizes it as a whole, he avoids reductionism by refraining from dismissing it entirely. In spite of its substandard quality, popular culture should not be wholly excluded by elites from being considered as one type of culture.

Popular culture’s complexity requires that those who would define it to be careful, situating its definition in the framework of the larger project. Lynch helpfully notes, “There is no academic consensus on what the term ‘popular culture’ means. The

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<sup>12</sup>Ken Myers, “Is Popular Culture Either?” in *Modern Reformation: “The Effects of Popular Culture on Religion.”* 6, no. 1 (1997): 9-12. Myers calls popular culture a “slippery and deceptive term for a massive and unwieldy reality.”

<sup>13</sup>Ibid. Myers notes that popular culture makes no effort to elevate or improve, is egalitarian and natural, and is a horizontal and affable adjective. High culture does make efforts to elevate and improve, suggesting standards, norms and difficult striving, and is hierarchical.

<sup>14</sup>The “greatest tragedy of all in the Church’s careless appropriation of popular culture [is that] popular culture is not really a culture after all.” Myers, “Is Popular Culture Either?” 11. His prophetic word of application from all of this scrutiny aimed at popular culture is that the church would resist the ways of popular culture and show the world a more excellent way. Rather than retooling her gathering to be compatible with the world the church should offer a counter-cultural model of living obedience. Insofar as Myers warns the church of succumbing to the mediums and messages of an unregenerate world, his word of caution is crucial.

<sup>15</sup>Myers’ caution and argumentation is much more developed in his book, *All God’s Children and Blue Suede Shoes*. He argues that popular culture “has some serious liabilities that it has inherited from its origins in distinctively modern, *secularized* movements.” He is not merely concerned with popular culture’s dangerous genetic worldview, but its effect: “our principal concern is with the sensibilities encouraged by popular culture versus those encouraged by high culture (as well as traditional culture).” Myers, *All God’s Children & Blue Suede Shoes*, 59, 122.

way in which a particular writer defines ‘popular culture’ is clearly shaped by the wider academic and cultural project with which they are concerned, and the definitions that we have noted here are clearly conflicting and contradictory.”<sup>16</sup> In practice, the term “has been used in quite different ways by different writers depending on the particular academic project that they are committed to.”<sup>17</sup> Defined minimally, popular culture seems to be that which “refers to widely held and commonly expressed thoughts and actions.”<sup>18</sup> In accord with this definition, this dissertation will assume that popular culture inherently possesses complex issues unique to itself, but it remains a part of the broader discussion regarding culture.

Sorting out these complex issues will engender application to popular culture, but also application to a much broader definition of culture. This more open definition will enable us to focus more on the contribution of culture, rather than the definition of culture. This is not intended to be a definitive work on culture’s definition, but a helpful starting point that addresses its contribution to the theological task.<sup>19</sup> My goal in defining culture is to discover common conclusions that anthropologists agree upon, correct their misdirection and give this dissertation a biblical-theological starting point for examining its engagement with the theological enterprise.

### **Culture in Theological Perspective**

In the beginning, culture was the *imago Dei* activity of humans crafting the raw materials of nature into theologically meaningful texts, offered to God as worship and shared in community as a means of theological enrichment. Inherent in this definition

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<sup>16</sup>Lynch, *Understanding Theology and Popular*, 13.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>18</sup>Barry Reay, *Popular Culture in England, 1550-1750* (Harlow, England: Longman, 1998), 1.

<sup>19</sup>Though academics have defined culture much more thoroughly elsewhere, the scope of this paper examines the definition of culture only insofar as it pertains to demonstrating the thesis. Thus, a working definition of “culture” will be the goal.

is the idea that every cultural activity and artifact bears the mark of God's grace, possessing epistemological value as existential revelation that deepens mankind's understanding of God and the world.<sup>20</sup> Reading this cultural expression leads the analyst to discern each respective people group's understanding of God and the world.

Very simply, culture makes theological statements. Even routine tasks that many consider to be merely "physical" reflect something of the person and presence of God. Gardening, for example, assumes the intelligent design and order of God's creation and reflects our belief in the order of the universe as well as God's sustaining providence that causes plants to grow (Ps 104:14). A thoughtful exegesis of the cultural practice of gardening reveals these things about God to be true. Culture reflects the person and presence of God (even post-Fall) because it is the activity of image-bearers who are sustained by God's common grace.<sup>21</sup> Thus, as a theological text culture should be

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<sup>20</sup>Vanhooser offers a definition of culture that captures this spiritual dimension as a central component of culture. "A culture is the objectification, the expression in words and works, of the "spirit" of a particular people who inhabit a particular time and place." Another way of explaining culture is to say that "(it) is a 'performance' of one's ultimate beliefs and values, a concrete way of 'staging' one's religion." Kevin Vanhooser, *First Theology: God, Scripture, and Hermeneutics* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002), 310, 313.

<sup>21</sup>Examples of cultural activities making theological statements abound. Some examples are more complex than others. Tractor pulling—also known as power pulling—is a sport that employs machinery that was originally designed for pragmatic functions (e. g. tilling, planting, and harvesting) for competition; in the early days of this sport they would "pull on Sunday and plow on Monday." Farmers originally invented tractors to aid them in their work, the seasonal routine of raising food. As time passed, farmers developed innovative ways to blend work with recreation. They hosted competitions to see whose tractor was the most powerful. Tractor pulling illustrates that both work and recreation are a part of human flourishing in a farmer's world. Scripture confirms that God is similar in this regard: God created the world in six days and rested on the seventh, surveying his work and concluding with an aesthetic evaluation, that it was very good. God both creates and enjoys the world. The cultural activity of tractor pulling illustrates the relationship between work and play in analogous form. For an interesting defense of play as the central activity in flourishing societies, see Dutch philosopher Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (Boston: Beacon, 1971). Huizinga argues that play, like civilization, requires structure and participants willing to create within limits. He surveys Plato, Medieval Times, the Renaissance and modern civilization, contending that man is not merely *homo faber* (man the maker), or *homo sapiens* (man the thinker), but also *homo ludens* (man the player).

For a thorough analysis of sports as religion see Michael Novak, *The Joy of Sports, Revised: Endzones, Bases, Baskets, Balls & the Consecration of the American Spirit* (Lanham, MD: Madison, 1993). Novak contends, "The basic reality of all human life is play, games, sport; these are the realities from which the basic metaphors for all that is important in the rest of life are drawn." *Ibid.*, xvii. He argues that "sports flow outward into action from a deep natural impulse that is radically religious: an impulse of freedom, respect for ritual limits, a zest for symbolic meaning, and a longing for perfection" *Ibid.*, 19. One

valued.<sup>22</sup> Cobb summarizes this point nicely: “even the most common productions of human creativity can be interpreted theologically as indicating the presence and activity of God in the midst of human existence.”<sup>23</sup> Since culture is a people group’s articulation of its understanding of God and the world these products are *cultural texts* that call for interpretation and appropriation.<sup>24</sup>

Paul Tillich recognized the inextricability of culture and religion: “religion is the substance of culture, culture is the form of religion.”<sup>25</sup> The individual’s attitude about life reveals whether he views it as a right to be exercised or a gift to be treasured. The holidays he celebrates indicate what religious and social traditions he holds dear. His artistic expression reveals whether he views life as an opportunity to assert his individuality or to reflect accurately the image in which he was created. His traditions and social mores reveal whether he believes he is an essentially meaningless collection of molecules or an intelligently designed human being who was created by a moral and personal God. In other words, theology is interwoven into our lives and is clearly evident on the “stage” of life we refer to as “culture.” A culture’s understanding and articulation of God through signs must not merely be abstractly explained, but interpreted based on the conglomeration of signs as a whole that compose its articulation of God.

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of Novak’s central points is that the basic and universal reality of sports tells us much about the human condition and our longing for transcendence. “Sports are at their heart a spiritual activity, a natural religion, a tribute to grace, beauty, and excellence.” Ibid., 346.

<sup>22</sup>This theocentric perspective on culture presupposes that communication and information is grounded in God himself. Theology and culture are both concerned with how we use language, but culture is pluralistic and grounds authority in various loci. Theology grounds the use of language in God himself.

<sup>23</sup>Kelton Cobb, *The Blackwell Guide to Theology and Popular Culture* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), 90. Cobb’s trajectory from this point lands him in a different place than the conclusions of this dissertation. Nonetheless, his contribution to this conversation is that culture is a theologically enriched human activity.

<sup>24</sup>Vanhoozer, *Everyday Theology*, 26. Furthermore, consider how every religion uses cultural texts to represent their teaching. William D. Romanowski, *Eyes Wide Open: Looking for God in Popular Culture* (Grand Rapids: BrazosPress, 2001), 13.

<sup>25</sup>Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), 42.

Tillich's statement above raises a very important question. Which is a form of which? Is culture theological, or is theology cultural? Whereas Tillich argued that theology is the substance of culture,<sup>26</sup> Kathryn Tanner argues that theological reflection is a form of cultural activity.<sup>27</sup> Evangelical apologist and cultural theorist Theodore Turnau helpfully inverts Tanner's description. Rather than suggesting that theological reflection is a form of cultural activity, he contends that culture is a form of theological activity. "Culture is meaningful because it has ultimately to do with this human-divine conversation, the play between revelational discourse and human cultural-counter discourse. In short, popular culture is meaningful because it is irreducibly religious."<sup>28</sup> If culture is what people do, and theology is discourse about God then both Tanner and Turnau are correct in some sense: theology is cultural and culture is theological.<sup>29</sup> Though both Tanner and Turnau are correct in some sense, Turnau properly renders the relationship in a way that grounds meaning theocentrically rather than anthropocentrically.

What then is the difference between theology and culture? Turnau does not seem to be suggesting that theological reflection and cultural activity are one and the same; they are to be distinguished without being separated. At its fundamental base culture is meaningful human activity of all sorts. At its core, theology is that which speaks about God. Thus, the inseparability between theology and culture is that culture is not made apart from also stating theological belief. That the human condition is

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<sup>26</sup>"Religion as ultimate concern is the meaning-giving substance of culture, and culture is the totality of forms in which the basic concern of religion expresses itself." Ibid., 42.

<sup>27</sup>Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology (Guides to Theological Inquiry)* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997), 63.

<sup>28</sup>Theodore A. Turnau III, "Reflecting Theologically on Popular Culture as Meaningful: The Role of Sin, Grace and General Revelation," *Calvin Theological Journal* 37 (November 2002): 287.

<sup>29</sup>An anthropocentric perspective might prefer the descriptor, "theology is culture." A theocentric perspective might prefer "culture is theological." The priority in definition should reflect the ontological priority.



inherently religious entails that when humans speak they are speaking about God (whether directly or indirectly, explicitly or implicitly, accurately or inaccurately).<sup>30</sup>

The intrinsic religious nature of culture is inescapable. Bavinck addressed this issue by tracing the emancipation of culture from the Christian religion in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. He concluded: “Nobody therefore, can declare that culture as such stands in contrast with religion, for all the preceding centuries raise a sharp protest against such an assertion. It can, at the most, be contended that our specifically present-day culture is in conflict with religion and Christianity.”<sup>31</sup> Each culture has the potential to stand in opposition with or in congruity to religion, not in itself as a whole, but in qualitative degrees of synthesis and antithesis.

Because cultural texts are theological, approaching culture as a significant exegetical endeavor is worth exploring. This case for its positive value in a post-Fall world remains to be argued. This introductory point is simply that culture is a theological text that inextricably reveals worldview. Henry Van Til helpfully summarized, “Culture is simply the service of God in our lives; it is religion externalized.”<sup>32</sup> The case that will be argued below is that exegesis of the theological text of culture is positively valuable: when exegeted properly, cultural texts can deepen our understanding of God’s world.<sup>33</sup>

This preliminary construal of culture as a theological text relies on a rich undergirding biblical storyline. A proper understanding of culture must account for its place in history, namely, its creation, distortion and redemption.

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<sup>30</sup>That humans cannot escape their religious nature is entailed by Scripture’s teaching that all people are in the Image of God. Whether conscious and reflective or not, we image God when we speak and act. This is explained and defended in more detail below.

<sup>31</sup>Bavinck, *Philosophy of Revelation*, 250.

<sup>32</sup>Henry Van Til, *The Calvinistic Concept of Culture* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1972), 200.

<sup>33</sup>Vanhoozer, *Everyday Theology*, 20.

In short, culture was purposed by God to be his image-bearers' staging of truth in word and deed as an act of worship. Though perfect in the beginning, this worshipful activity has since been corrupted. When man rebelled, his staging of truth in culture suffered the effects of the Fall, being subjugated to the effects of sin. One day, the staging of truth will be made right, absent of the effects of sin. Redeemed humanity will cultivate the new heavens and the new earth as they rightly stage the truth of God in word and deed. Even now, however, God holds back the effects of sin from being as bad as they could be, and graciously empowers all people to articulate the truth as they simultaneously suppress it.<sup>34</sup> This progression will outline the next section of this project.

In addition to the insights that this storyline approach will yield, the doctrines of *imago Dei*, common grace, and general revelation will provide rich reservoirs of reflection. *Imago Dei* helps us understand that God created mankind to image him by crafting meaningful culture. Common grace helps us understand that God restrains sin from having its full effect and empowers mankind to still speak truth, so that mankind's theological articulation is not as wrong as it could be. As one dimension of God's common grace bestowed on all people, general revelation clarifies the fact that God has bestowed truth content to all people of all time. These three theological underpinnings inform a primary contention of this dissertation: "culture" contributes to our understanding of the theological task because it is a theological expression of *imago dei*-reflecting, common grace receiving, general revelation-transmitting people. This project will locate the systematic articulation of these three doctrines in the context of the Bible's storyline.

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<sup>34</sup>The simultaneous articulation and suppression of the truth by the unregenerate is actually clearly seen and confirmed in their rehearsal of it, when interpreted through the lens of Scripture.

## Culture Created as Worship and Witness

God created the world and designed it to reflect him and his glory (Ps 19:1-4). He created mankind to image him. According to God's design, when man spoke or acted, he imaged God. When a carpenter constructed a building, his construction reflected in a limited way that God constructed. When an orator delivered a speech, his oration reflected that God speaks. Frame states simply, "Everything we were created to be reflects God in some way."<sup>35</sup>

God commanded Adam and Eve to reflect him by making culture in Genesis 1:28, the "Cultural Mandate."<sup>36</sup> This hearing of the Cultural Mandate is the first human experience recorded in Scripture. Adam and Eve were to fill and subdue the earth. They were not to stay in Eden, but leaving father and mother and living with each other, mankind was to fill the earth (Gen 2:24). They were to order and nurture the creation into a culture. This role was grounded in their identity as image-bearers. "Culture, as we see it originate in Genesis, was intended by God to be a fulfillment of the image of God, an imitation of God."<sup>37</sup> "God's work was creative, sustaining, governing; so too, on a creaturely level, was man's. God's original works of absolute origination found analogues in man's constructive and inventive activities, in his artistic creativity, and in his procreative functioning."<sup>38</sup> Man was charged to imitate God by perfecting the consecration of the world for God's honor,<sup>39</sup> in worship to him and witness to the world.

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<sup>35</sup>John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Word of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2010), 316.

<sup>36</sup>Kline expands this idea of man imaging God to include work, biological procreation, technological development, social propriety, and interpretive activity. Meredith Kline, *Kingdom Prologue: Genesis Foundations for a Covenantal Worldview* (South Hamilton, MA: Two Age, 1993), 74-76.

<sup>37</sup>Myers, *All God's Children & Blue Suede Shoes*, 39.

<sup>38</sup>Kline, *Kingdom Prologue*, 75.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*, 77.

Given the plethora of perspectives on the *imago Dei* and the vigorous debate, this doctrine and its implications for culture merits further consideration.<sup>40</sup> What exactly does the Scripture mean when it says that God created man in his own image (Gen 1:27a)? The first question is, who is the “us” in whose image mankind is created?<sup>41</sup> This topic has been taken up elsewhere more fully, but the explanation that best seems to fit the evidence is that the “us” refers to God in his divine fullness, as Kidner argues.<sup>42</sup> This excludes proposals such as self-deliberation, the royal we, the angels or merely Christ or the Spirit.<sup>43</sup> “This fullness, glimpsed in the Old Testament, was to be unfolded as tri-unity” in the NT.”<sup>44</sup>

The second question is of utmost significance; what do the two key words *tselem* (“Image”) and *demuth* (“likeness”) mean?<sup>45</sup> Hoekema demonstrates that the best rendering that flows from the lack of Hebrew conjunctive is “let us make man in our image, after our likeness.” In summary, these two words are not essentially different, but

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<sup>40</sup>As Kenneth M. Gardoski notes, however, in an ETS Eastern Region Annual Conference paper, “Is Culture a Reflection of the *Imago Dei*?” very few single and multivolume systematic theologies have an entry for culture in their subject indexes; nor do they substantively interact with the relationship between the *imago Dei* and culture.

<sup>41</sup>Scholars suggest at least six possibilities. See D. J. A. Clines, “The Image of God in Man,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 19 (1968) 62-69; G. Hasel, “The Meaning of ‘Let Us’ in Gn 1:26,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 13 (1975): 58-66.

<sup>42</sup>Derek Kidner, *Genesis*, TOTC (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1967), 52. Indeed, as Hoekema adds, “Though we cannot say that we have here clear teaching about the Trinity, we do learn that God exists as a ‘plurality.’” Anthony A. Hoekema, *Created in God’s Image* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 13.

<sup>43</sup>Gordon Wenham discusses six options, and tentatively endorses the heavenly court interpretation. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 1 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1987), 27-28.

<sup>44</sup>Kidner, *Genesis*, 52.

<sup>45</sup>Wenham discusses the rarity of *tselem* in the Bible and the intense difficulty of its interpretation. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 29.

are used nearly interchangeably.<sup>46</sup> Victor Hamilton concurs, stating, “the two terms are found essentially the same in use and are interchangeable.”<sup>47</sup>

Not everyone agrees with a neat and clean conclusion such as Hoekema and Hamilton.<sup>48</sup> Irenaeus, for example, made a distinction between image and likeness.<sup>49</sup> Hoekema notes that “both the Septuagint and the Vulgate insert an *and* between the two expressions, giving the impression that “image” and “likeness” refer to different things.”<sup>50</sup> Over the centuries, many nuanced positions have emerged.<sup>51</sup>

Erickson systematically summarizes three primary categories of interpretation regarding the actual meaning of the image: (1) substantive, (2) relational and (3) functional.<sup>52</sup> The substantive view has been dominant throughout church history, being

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<sup>46</sup>Hoekema also notes that the study of these words as used in Genesis 5:1, 5:3 and again in 9:6 reveals that these words are not intended to describe different aspects of the human being, but are used “almost interchangeably. . . . The two words together tell us that man is a representation of God who is like God in certain respects.” Hoekema, *Created in God’s Image*, 13.

<sup>47</sup>“Further support for understanding the terms as interchangeable comes from a ninth-century statue recovered from Tell Feheriyeh (ancient Sikan) in Syria that bears a bilingual text in Assyrian and Aramaic. As a pair *selem* and *demut* are used with the same meaning in reference to the statue.” Victor Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1-17*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 166-67.

<sup>48</sup>K. A. Matthews argues against any neat and clean solution, suggesting that this passage “is not interested in defining what is the image of God in man. . . . Most [interpretations] are based on subjective inferences rather than objective exegesis.” K. A. Matthews, *Genesis 1-11:26*, The New American Commentary, vol. 1A (Nashville: Holman Reference, 1996), 137. Also, contrary to Hoekema’s interpretation regarding the synonymy of image and likeness, Bruce K. Waltke and Cathi J. Fredricks briefly note that the synonymy of the terms is unlikely. They suggest that *likeness* serves to “ensure the distinctness of humanity from God.” Bruce K. Waltke and Cathi J. Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 66-67 n. 51.

<sup>49</sup>Hoekema, *Created in God’s Image*, 35.

<sup>50</sup>*Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>51</sup>Hoekema nicely surveys the primary perspectives from church history in Irenaeus, Thomas Aquinas, John Calvin, Karl Barth, and G. C. Berkouwer, in Hoekema, *Created in God’s Image*, 33-65. Gregg R. Allison also deftly surveys the historical development of the church’s understanding of the creation and nature of humanity. Gregg R. Allison, *Historical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 321-41.

<sup>52</sup>Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 520-29. With greater nuance, Wenham summarizes five interpretations that have emerged. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 29-33. Also consider G. C. Berkouwer’s holistic formulation, which suggests that the whole man is the image of God. G. C. Berkouwer, *Man: The Image of*

held by Irenaeus, Augustine, Aquinas and Calvin.<sup>53</sup> In this view, the image is an ontological characteristic or quality of a human. Some describe this ontology as literally physical, others metaphorical, but most commonly psychological or spiritual qualities, such as reason, morality, volition and spirituality. In any case, the image is located within humans.

In the relational view, the image is not resident within human nature, but is an experience of relationship. This recently developed view was held by the likes of Karl Barth and Emil Brunner. We cannot experience full humanity by ourselves, but only as we love others and God in community.<sup>54</sup> Thus, the image is constituted by social relatedness.

The functional view does not focus on the intrinsic ontology of the image bearer, or on the relational fulfillment of the image bearer, but the *function* of the image bearer. The proponents of this view point to the close grammatical proximity between God making man in his image then commanding mankind to subdue creation, thus suggesting that the juxtaposition bears significance (Gen 1:26-28; Ps 8:7-8).<sup>55</sup>

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*God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), 77. Or, as Herman Bavinck similarly suggested, “Man does not simply *bear* or *have* the image of God; he *is* the image of God.” “From the doctrine that man has been created in the image of God flows the clear implication that that image extends to man in his entirety. Nothing in man is excluded from the image of God. All creatures reveal traces of God, but only man is the image of God. And he is that image totally, in soul and body, in all faculties and powers, in all conditions and relationships. Man is the image of God because and insofar as he is true man, and he is man, true and real man, because and insofar as he is the image of God”; translated and quoted by Hoekema, *Created in God’s Image*, 65.

<sup>53</sup>Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 520.

<sup>54</sup>See Emil Brunner, *Man in Revolt: A Christian Anthropology* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1947); idem, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption* (London: Lutterworth, 1952); Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1958), 3:1.

<sup>55</sup>For a couple of representatives of this view Erickson points to Norman Snaith, “The Image of God,” *Expository Times* 86, no.1 (October, 1974): 24. Also, Sigmund O. P. Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel’s Worship* (New York: Abingdon, 1962), 1:57, and Leonard Verduin, *Somewhat Less Than God: The Biblical View of Man* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970).

Furthermore, the functionalist highlights the fact that immediately after God created, he commanded his image bearers to have dominion.

How might each of these three different viewpoints connect culture, then, to the image? The structuralist would entertain the idea that culture is a *reflective result* of image-bearer's activity. The relationalist would entertain the idea that culture is a facilitating environment of the image-bearers' *communal activity*.<sup>56</sup> The functionalist might suggest that culture is the visible counterpart to the image, namely, its tangible outworking of man's function in the natural and social systems of the world. Though diversity exists among the viewpoints, they would each likely agree that culture is not the image itself, though it is intimately and directly a result of the image. In other words, culture's essence can only be properly understood as it pertains to the image-bearing reality of being human. Myers summarizes this idea, "Culture, as we see it originate in Genesis, was intended by God to be a fulfillment of the image of God, an imitation of God."<sup>57</sup>

A full-orbed treatment of the image lies beyond the scope of this project. Grudem helpfully contributed to this current conversation when he stated that much of the controversy over the meaning of "image of God" is seen to be a search for too narrow and too specific a meaning.<sup>58</sup> D. A. Carson writes, "'image of God' is not a frequently used technical term with firm semantic borders, but a picture-expression dropped into the beginning of the Bible's story-line and used relatively infrequently thereafter."<sup>59</sup> Without

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<sup>56</sup>Turnau explores the relationship between the image and culture from a "relational" perspective in Turnau, *Popologetics*, 48-59. He explores the upward image as worship, the sideways image as loving one another, and the downward image as "taming" creation. Though his position on the image is different, many of his conclusions regarding culture's definition resemble the conclusions set forth in this dissertation.

<sup>57</sup>Myers, *All God's Children & Blue Suede Shoes*, 39.

<sup>58</sup>Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 444.

<sup>59</sup>D. A. Carson notes that the image creates a hunger in humanity for art, building, expression, and science. D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Grand Rapids:

getting distracted by minutiae, a brief comment about the structuralist viewpoint will conclude this discussion surrounding the image and permit this conversation to drive the thesis of this dissertation to its demonstration.<sup>60</sup>

The structuralist viewpoint seems to be the most plausible.<sup>61</sup> The implications of the image certainly include relationship and function, but the image is not contingent on our activity. In other words, God created us in his image apart from any human action or response. Erickson lays out several reasonable inferences that support the structural view.<sup>62</sup> (1) The image is universal within the human race. (2) The image has not been lost. (3) The image is not present in any one person to a greater degree than another. (4) The image is not correlated with any variable. (5) The image should be thought of as primarily substantive. (6) The image enables the fulfillment of human destiny. That the structuralist viewpoint is the most plausible does not preclude the employment of the insights of the other two views, broadly construed.

In agreement with Bruce Ware,<sup>63</sup> Hoekema's description of the image as mirror and representation seem to be most helpful. Hoekema asks, "Must we think of the image of God in man as involving only what man is and not what he does, or only what he does and not what he is, or both what he is and what he does? Is "image of God" only a description of the way in which the human being functions, or is it also a description of

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Zondervan, 1996), 204-05.

<sup>60</sup>Wenham agrees with Grudem's assessment above. After surveying five broad interpretations of the image Wenham concludes his discussion: this survey "indicates the difficulty of determining what Genesis understands by the image of God. None of the suggestions seem entirely satisfactory, though there may be elements of truth in many of them." Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 31.

<sup>61</sup>The structuralist position readily defends the claim that a person with Down Syndrome or a mental disability retains the image.

<sup>62</sup>Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 531.

<sup>63</sup>Bruce Ware, "Male and Female Complementarity and the Image of God," *Journal for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* 7, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 16.



the kind of being he or she is?”<sup>64</sup> Hoekema maintains both aspects of what kind of being man is but also what man does.<sup>65</sup> Kline argues similarly from a grammatical standpoint, “Man’s likeness to God is a demand to be like God; the indicative here has the force of an imperative.”<sup>66</sup> Human beings were created to function and relate in certain ways, but the structure of the man enables him to perform the function and relation.<sup>67</sup>

The scope of this paper precludes a thorough defense of this viewpoint. In the final analysis, few would disagree that relationships, dominion and the creation of culture are at least entailed by the image, even if they are not ontologically essential to the image.<sup>68</sup> Most proponents of orthodox positions on the image would minimally concur with Grudem’s broadly construed summary statement: that we are in the image of God means “that man is like God and represents God.”<sup>69</sup>

Most interpreters agree that man’s dominion over the earth is an “essential aspect of the image of God.”<sup>70</sup> Whereas God creatively spoke the cosmos into existence, mankind shapes and crafts the already-existing world. The verb rendered *subdue* is

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<sup>64</sup>Hoekema, *Created in God’s Image*, 69.

<sup>65</sup>Ibid.

<sup>66</sup>Kline, *Kingdom Prologue*, 62.

<sup>67</sup>As Hoekema points out, in a similar way that an eagle’s characteristic action of flying is enabled by its structure of being winged, mankind is able to *do* only because of who he *is*. Hoekema, *Created in God’s Image*, 69.

<sup>68</sup>Though this is beyond the scope of this dissertation, an examination of the semantics related to culture and the image likely would reveal further insights.

<sup>69</sup>Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 442. Cornelius Van Til argued similarly that “Man was created as an analogue of God; his thinking, his willing and his doing is therefore properly conceived as at every point analogical to the thinking, willing and doing of God.” Cornelius Van Til, “Nature and Scripture” in *The Infallible Word: A Symposium by the Members of the Faculty of Westminster Theological Seminary*, N. B. Stonehouse, Paul Woolley, eds., (Philadelphia: Westminster Theological Seminary, 1946), 265. Waltke identifies an incredible benefit of the image: “A human being is theomorphic, made like God so that God can communicate himself to people.” Waltke, *Genesis*, 65.

<sup>70</sup>Hoekema, *Created in God’s Image*, 78.

*kabash*, which means to subdue or bring into bondage.<sup>71</sup> “This verb tells us that man is to explore the resources of the earth, to cultivate its land, to mine its buried treasures. . . . Man is called by God to develop all the potentialities found in nature and in humankind as a whole. He must seek to develop . . . science, technology, and art.” a God-glorifying culture.<sup>72</sup> Stewarding the created order into a habitat increasingly fit for dwelling is one way mankind is to represent God. “God reigns over the cosmos, creating it a holy temple of his Glory; therefore, his human image-bearer must exercise dominion (under God) over the world, sanctifying it for the presence of the Creator-Lord.”<sup>73</sup> Whereas God reigns over the entire cosmos and inhabits it as his temple, image bearers are to subdue and have dominion over the earth, refining and inhabiting it. Turnau describes it like this: “We express the image of God by imaging his creativity through obeying the cultural mandate, that is, by forming and taming the earth. When we do culture, we image God by mimicking his massive creativity on a miniature scale.”<sup>74</sup>

This Cultural Mandate is the imperative to image God by refining the world into an increasingly glorious habitat that reflected “maximal, global mastery.”<sup>75</sup> Mankind is to develop God’s initial local garden into a widespread city. Kline develops this thought. “The cultural mandate put all the capacity of human brain and brawn to work in a challenging and rewarding world to develop his original paradise home into a universal city.”<sup>76</sup> Some mandates specifically defined man’s role in the advancement of God’s

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<sup>71</sup>Kline notes, “Even if the verb *kabash*, ‘subdue,’ (Gen 1:28) does not mean precisely ‘conquer’ in this instance (cf., e.g., Num 32:22; Josh 18:1), it at least has the force of bringing into subjection (cf. 2 Chr 28:10; Neh 5:5; Jer 34:11, 16).” Kline, *Kingdom Prologue*, 69.

<sup>72</sup>Hoekema, *Created in God’s Image*, 78.

<sup>73</sup>Kline, *Kingdom Prologue*, 63.

<sup>74</sup>Turnau, *Popologetics*, 57.

<sup>75</sup>Kline, *Kingdom Prologue*, 70.

<sup>76</sup>*Ibid.*, 70.

kingdom, whereas other mandates established the institutional structures of man's historical existence.<sup>77</sup> These vertical and horizontal mandates dealt with man's cultural task and cultic role in an interconnected manner; man's total life and labor is religious.<sup>78</sup> God's servants recognize that all functions are to be carried out as service to God and thus are thoroughly religious.<sup>79</sup> Myers concurs, "this cultural mandate was by nature a religious duty."<sup>80</sup> In the beginning, culture was intended by God to reflect his glory.

Individuals were not to craft culture as a reflection and magnification of God's glory in isolation. The religious nature of the cultural mandate is foremost vertical worship to God, but also relates to the horizontal social realm. Grunlan and Mayers develop this thought by proposing to study culture in a way that centers on the idea of functional creation.<sup>81</sup> As they explain, God created three major systems in which man would live: natural, cultural and spiritual; or material, sociological and theological. Each realm is characterized by disharmony due to the fall, but each realm retains marks of goodness in the midst of its overall characteristic brokenness.<sup>82</sup> This helps us understand the role of man as image-bearer, who was designed for personal and unbroken fellowship with God, to rule over the earth and to enjoy relationships. These two functions flow from the first capacity; that is, man's worship of God informs his functional responsibility to rightly steward the earth and live in peaceful community. Kenneth Gardoski put it like this: "culture lies at the intersection of man's nature as God's image-

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<sup>77</sup>Ibid., 66.

<sup>78</sup>Ibid., 66-67.

<sup>79</sup>Ibid., 67.

<sup>80</sup>Myers, *All God's Children & Blue Suede Shoes*, 39.

<sup>81</sup>Stephen A. Grunlan and Marvin K. Mayers, *Cultural Anthropology: A Christian Perspective*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988).

<sup>82</sup>Ibid., 38-39. Grunlan and Mayers are not the only ones who explain culture in this tri-perspectival fashion. Turnau describes the threefold orientation of the image as upward, sideways and downward. Turnau, *Popologetics*, 48-57.

bearer, and the assignments God has given man to commune with his God, to rule and subdue God's creation as His royal representative, and to enjoy harmonious relations with his fellow man."<sup>83</sup>

Hoekema grounds a similar description firmly and supremely in Christology; namely, that Jesus "as the image of the invisible God" (Col 1:15) demonstrates what "man as the perfect image of God should be like."<sup>84</sup> Jesus was wholly directed toward God, the neighbor, and he ruled over nature.<sup>85</sup> Just like Christ, we are to function in this threefold arena of relationality. As we are properly directed toward God, the other two directions take their place. In other words, our worship of God directly shapes the nature of our relationships with neighbor and nature.<sup>86</sup> When our relationships with neighbor and nature are ordered as worship to God, we locate them properly.

Of utmost importance is the subordinate character of man's role to God. Man's cultural activity was never intended by God to be autonomous. His cultural activity is imitative and secondary.<sup>87</sup> In other words, men do not create meaning, but they take already-present meaning and "receptively reconstruct the meaning of the things already imparted to them by the Creator."<sup>88</sup> As Kuyper said, "We can fashion and process things that exist, but only God creates."<sup>89</sup> Mankind's crafting of culture is imitative and secondary in comparison with God's creating of the cosmos. Meaning production is not

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<sup>83</sup>Gardoski, "Is Culture a Reflection of the *Imago Dei*?" 17.

<sup>84</sup>Hoekema, *Created in God's Image*, 73.

<sup>85</sup>Ibid., 73-75. Hoekema attributes thanks to Hendrikus Berkhof, *De Mens Onderweg*, 19-26, for this discussion of the image of God as seen in the life and work of Jesus.

<sup>86</sup>Hoekema, *Created in God's Image*, 75-76.

<sup>87</sup>Kline, *Kingdom Prologue*, 76.

<sup>88</sup>Ibid.

<sup>89</sup>Abraham Kuyper, *Wisdom and Wonder: Common Grace in Sciences & Art*, trans. Nelson D. Kloosterman (Grand Rapids: Christian's Library, 2011), 150.

simply for the sake of fighting the chaos of the world by finding personal significance in a subjective, existentialist sense. Rather, meaning production in culture is a response to transcendent meaning that is infused into the cosmos. As Turnau has argued, “We are responding to meaning that is already there, woven in creation.”<sup>90</sup> Creation bursts with praise to God and the human constituency congruently attests to the same. We are taking meaning-filled materials of creation and refashioning them with nuanced application and added significance. We are not *creating* meaning out of nothing, but we are *crafting* meaning from the meaning already granted.<sup>91</sup>

Elsewhere, Turnau developed further this idea that culture making is imitative of and subordinate to God. “When we ‘do culture,’ we are taking revelation in our hands and fashioning it for our own purposes (to build a house, paint a picture, or create a television show). The raw materials reveal their Creator.”<sup>92</sup> God’s original intention of our culture-forming here on earth was that we would offer back to God what we developed from creation. In his attempts at defining culture, Bavinck concurs with this idea that crafting culture presupposes already-existing meaningful materials: “Culture has come into use along with other terms such as ‘civilization, enlightenment, development, education,’ indicates generally cultivation, improvement and always presupposes an object which must be improved. Culture in the broadest sense thus includes all the labor which human power expends on nature.”<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>90</sup>Turnau, *Popologetics*, 47.

<sup>91</sup>For an illustration that there is “nothing new under the sun,” consider the restaurant Taco Bell. Though they routinely improve their menu with new and exciting entrees, the basic ingredients remain the same. They perpetually repackage meat, cheese, and vegetables wrapped up in a shell, crafted with ever-refining nuance. In a similar way, human culture is a perpetual repackaging of the meaningful materials that God has graciously granted mankind.

<sup>92</sup>Theodore A. Turnau, III, “Reflecting Theologically on Popular Culture as Meaningful: The Role of Sin, Grace and General Revelation,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 37 (2002): 289.

<sup>93</sup>Bavinck, *Philosophy of Revelation*, 249.

Nature includes not only the whole visible world of phenomena that is outside man, but also, in a wider sense, man himself; not his body alone, but his soul also. Culture is not restricted to fashioning the raw materials of nature. It is, then, the cultivation of the raw materials of nature as well as the cultivation of the heart. “The faculties and powers which man possesses have not been acquired by him, but are given to him by God; they are a gift of nature, and these gifts are a means for cultivating the external world, as well as an object which must be cultivated.”<sup>94</sup> In one dimension, culture reveals its creator because human faculties work with raw materials of nature. In another dimension, culture reveals its creator because human faculties are themselves being cultivated and refined. The two circles of culture, then, are those things pertaining to material goods (agriculture, cattle-rearing, industry) and those things pertaining to the objective realization of his ideals: the good, the true and the beautiful.<sup>95</sup>

God intended that these two circles of culture be offered to himself foremost for his glory, enjoyed by his creatures because it pleased him. It was to be a fashioning of the raw materials of nature into something that added significance to the materials; it would be fashioned into a work that brought glory to God.<sup>96</sup> Because of this connection between God and his world, culture is rightly understood as “any and all human effort and labor expended on the cosmos, to unearth its treasures and its riches and bring them into the service of man for the enrichment of human existence unto the glory of God.”<sup>97</sup>

For this reason, culture was not merely intended to be something man does, but that God values. God created us as his image and glory (1 Cor 11:7; Rom 1:23; 2 Cor 3:18; Heb 1:3). Adam was commanded to worship God and carry God’s glory to all

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<sup>94</sup>Ibid.

<sup>95</sup>Ibid., 250.

<sup>96</sup>Or, as in the case of a fallen world, with culture bearing the marks of its fashioner’s sin, glory to its creator, man.

<sup>97</sup>Van Til, *The Calvinistic Concept of Culture*, 29-30.

people. This worship and witness grounds the “meaning” component of culture that anthropologists have identified<sup>98</sup>; culture is meaningful because it is crafted by image bearers whose physical actions possess transcendent meaning. It grounds culture’s meaning in its design by God to reflect him.

Armed with this theological framing of culture as it was intended to be in the beginning,<sup>99</sup> we begin to understand why Matthew Arnold defined it as “the pursuit of our total perfection by means of getting to know, on all the matters which most concern us, the best which has been thought and said in the world.”<sup>100</sup> “The best” ultimately finds its grounding in transcendent God. Similarly, William Herridge wrote, “A thoroughly cultured person is one who is thoroughly matured in every part of his life, so that he is

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<sup>98</sup>This will be examined below.

<sup>99</sup>One can speculate as to what cultural artifacts would have been present in the Garden of Eden, had the Fall never happened. Based on the cultural mandate, one can speculate in a generic sense to say that architecture, music, language, literature, politics, mathematics, technology and other sciences would have continued to be developed and refined. But would mankind have engineered something like the Empire State Building? Would musical content and form more resemble Gregorian Chant, Johann Sebastian Bach, the Hindi national anthem Jana Gana Mana, Bono, Justin Bieber, or Eminem? Without the tragic Tower of Babel language confusion, how differently would we approach language studies? Would we be reading and writing works similar to that of poet Robert Frost, crime fiction and legal thriller writer John Grisham, or lexicographer Noah Webster? Would our political system resemble a constitutional republic, theocracy or a system yet to be developed? How long would mankind have needed to develop what we know as the Pythagorean theorem, or to discover the insights of Euclidean geometry? Would we have cellular telephones, Facebook, pesticides and fertilizers? Would the Garden of Eden need an Environmental Protection Agency? These questions are largely speculative, but can be answered in some measure. Being free from the stain of sin, culture in Eden always brought worship to God and enriched the community’s understanding of God and his world. Culture in Eden was the activity of image bearers whose image was not tarnished by sin. In all likelihood, mankind would have engineered more complex buildings than we currently engineer, crafted a greater and more excellent diversity of musical, linguistic, and literary style and content, and developed a leadership structure under God’s authority that would have successfully fostered human flourishing to God’s glory. Mathematicians would have reasoned unimpaired by the noetic effects of sin, so we can expect that the discipline of mathematics would be developed more quickly and much further than we have witnessed in several thousand years of fallen mankind’s effort. Technological advances for the improvement of human communication would be free from narcissistic relationship-impairment for which some current social media technology receives criticism. Mankind would steward his environment correctly under God’s rule, not abusing or exploiting the natural resources of the earth. Much of our cultural activity today reflects our best attempts to withstand the curse of the Fall and our failed stewardship of God’s good gifts. Pure pre-Fall culture was positive, or constructive, whereas post-Fall culture is a mixture of construction and deconstruction, as well as a defensive effort (something like damage control) to curb the negative effects of our abusive behavior.

<sup>100</sup>Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy: An Essay in Political and Social Criticism* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1897), xi.

able to fulfill the purpose of his creation.”<sup>101</sup> T. S. Eliot famously defined culture as similarly valuable, that it is “simply as that which makes life worth living. And it is what justifies other people and other generations in saying, when they contemplate the remains and the influence of an extinct civilisation, that it was worth while for the civilisation to have existed.”<sup>102</sup> Employing Eliot’s primary contention with a theological understanding of culture, one could rightly state that culture gives life meaning and purpose insofar as it fulfills its original intention to direct the human heart to the glory of God. Thus, culture that endures is that which was worthwhile for God’s glory, leaving a witness that withstands the decay of time.<sup>103</sup>

Culture was to be a book, similar to the “book of nature”—a phrase coined to locate nature’s role as a companion volume to the book of Scripture. “We know him . . . by the creation, preservation, and government of the universe; which is before our eyes as a most elegant book, wherein all creatures, great and small, are as so many characters leading us to contemplate *the invisible things of God*, namely, *his eternal power and Godhead*”—all of which is “sufficient to convince men, and leave them without

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<sup>101</sup>William T. Herridge, “Christianity and Culture,” *The Presbyterian Review* 9 (1888): 389.

<sup>102</sup>T. S. Eliot, “Notes toward the Definition of Culture,” in *Christianity and Culture* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968), 100.

<sup>103</sup>Masselink states this more strongly when he suggests that there is really only one true culture, the Christian culture. William Masselink, *General Revelation and Common Grace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953), 200. Mark Coppenger’s book *Moral Apologetics* vibrantly illustrates this idea that Christianity promotes human flourishing better than any other worldview. He wrote this book with the intent to push back against the criticism of those foes that would declare that Christianity is morally and culturally deficient. He writes, “It is hard to open a newspaper, walk through a library, or turn on the television without seeing fresh evidence that a Christian approach to life makes people and societies flourish and that those who turn their backs on genuine Christianity are liable to behave wickedly.” Mark Coppenger, *Moral Apologetics for Contemporary Christians* (Nashville: B&H, 2011), 1, 6.



excuse.”<sup>104</sup> In a similar way, culture was intended to be a book that exhibited the nature of man, who was to image God.<sup>105</sup>

The book of culture would speak more fully and accurately of God than raw nature. Culture crafted by image-bearers would image God by rehearsing the good, the true and the beautiful.<sup>106</sup> “Another quality [of man’s image-bearing makeup] is man’s aesthetic sense, whereby human beings not only can appreciate the beauty that God has lavished on his creation, but also can create artistic beauty of their own—in painting, sculpture, poetry, and music.”<sup>107</sup> No tree or animal possesses this aesthetic capacity. Hoekema articulately draws the connection between man’s aesthetic capacity and the image: “Our sense of beauty is a feeble reflection of the God who scatters beauty profusely over snow-crowned peaks, lake-jeweled valleys, and awe-inspiring sunsets.”<sup>108</sup> When we cultivate the raw materials of God’s creation into a culture, we model God’s original fashioning of the formless and void mass that became the created order.<sup>109</sup>

This imaging of God in culture was God’s intention in the beginning. “Had man remained in paradise and had there been no sin, he would still have had the task of

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<sup>104</sup>Belgic Confession, *Article II*, in *The Creeds of Christendom with a History and Critical Notes*, vol. 3, ed. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996).

<sup>105</sup>Culture’s limitations as a book are similar to the limitations of nature as a book in this sense: neither is first order propositional revelation that incarnates God’s thoughts in the specific manner as Scripture and Jesus. Though Scripture, nature, and culture can be considered “books” in one sense, the inspired propositional character of Scripture grounds Scripture’s supreme authority.

<sup>106</sup>As Greg Johnson argues, “Human culture within God’s design is intended to display the perfections of God’s character to the entire universe.” Greg Johnson, *The World According to God: A Biblical View of Culture, Work, Science, Sex and Everything Else* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002), 92.

<sup>107</sup>Hoekema, *Created in God’s Image*, 70.

<sup>108</sup>Ibid., 71.

<sup>109</sup>Clearly, the creator creature distinction charges to the fore in this discussion when we consider that fact that God spoke the world into existence *ex nihilo*; whereas humanity works with preexisting physical materials and the history of ideas under the sun, God is eternally self-existent and self-sufficient. Of his good pleasure he exercised autonomous creativity and power in creating the cosmos.

culture. In fact ‘culture’ would have been an all-comprehensive term to express what his task would have been in relationship to the world which was placed under him.”<sup>110</sup> If the Fall had never happened, “We would intuitively understand [creation’s] music, and would respond to it by developing cultural stories and artifacts and practices that would join in that song by glorifying God, loving other humans, and caring for other creatures. Further, these cultural products would themselves take on the character of revelation because they were made by God’s image-bearers, and made from his creation. . . . It would have been incredible and excellent—a spiraling cycle of virtue and glory that would continue forever.”<sup>111</sup> God would be worshipped for eternity as he rightly deserves to be and his glory would continue unabatedly to fill the cosmos and the hearts of men.

### **Culture Redeemed to Be Worship and Witness**

The worship and witness of God through the works and words of mankind was an ever-present reality in the Garden. However, when Adam rebelled on behalf of mankind, cultural activity took on distorted dimensions. Culture presently reflects a mixture of grace and idolatry, the presence of God and the rebellion of men. God has not abandoned the world, but is in the process of redeeming and restoring it. Thus, mankind finds himself *in media res*. One day, this redemption will be realized finally and fully, and incredible and excellent cultural activity conducted as witness and worship to God will be restored. Bavinck notes that the reunification and reconciliation of bifurcated disciplinary studies will characterize this redemption.

Theology first came into existence in the body of Christ when *gratia communis* and *gratia specialis* flowed together. Consequently, theology accords to the other sciences their full due. . . . Theology also can rule only by serving. She is strong when she is weak; she is greatest when she seeks to be least. She can be glorious

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<sup>110</sup>Meeter and Marshall, *The Basic Ideas of Calvinism*, 58-59.

<sup>111</sup>Turnau compares this to a symphony in which other image bearers add to and improve on the music. “Think of a succession of jazz solos in which each soloist is inspired by and builds on the previous solo.” Turnau, *Popologetics*, 63.

when she seeks to know nothing save Christ and him crucified. Theology is ultimately nothing other than interpretation of the *gratia Dei* in the arena of science. Grace she ponders and grace she seeks to understand in its length and breadth, in its height and depth. In the middle of the human woe that life reveals all about us, and also in science, theology raises its doxology of the love of God shown forth in Jesus Christ our Lord. And she prophesies a glorious future in which all oppositions, including those between nature and grace, shall be reconciled, and all things, whether on earth or in heaven, shall again in Christ be one.<sup>112</sup>

Though culture currently bears the marks of mankind's rebellion, one day sin will be completely eradicated and cultural activity will flourish as it was originally created to flourish: in service of and worship to Jesus.<sup>113</sup>

The restoration of cultural activity back to the way that it was meant to be is not an isolated item on God's agenda. This restoration of cultural activity is intricately connected with God's restoration of the image. "Reformed theology has traditionally held that mankind was created in the image of God, which was perfect in knowledge and righteousness, suffered irreparable destruction in the fall, and is delivered only through Christ's death and resurrection, whereby the image is begin progressively transformed in the believer (2 Cor 3:18) until its state of perfection at the resurrection (Rom 8:29; 1 Cor 15:49; Col 3:9-10)."<sup>114</sup> By God's grace we are renewed in knowledge after the image of our creator (Col 3:10; cf. Eph 4:24). In other words, the image will be restored in all who come to the Father through Jesus, and mankind's imaging activity of culture making will also be restored.

Bavinck offers helpful commentary in this regard because he connects God's original intention for culture in creation with the restoration of the unregenerate person's

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<sup>112</sup>Herman Bavinck, "Common Grace," trans. R. C. Van Leeuwen, *Calvin Theological Journal* 24 (April 1989): 64-65.

<sup>113</sup>This restoration is not only directed *to* Christ, but this restoration happens exclusively *through* Christ. "Only Christ, the Second Adam (cf. Ps 8 and Heb 2), can completely fulfill the regent function of the image. . . . He brings everything under his dominion (Luke 10:18-19; Eph 1:22; Col 1:18-20), including Satan and evil (Gen 3:15; Matt 4:1-11; Col 3:10), and enters into the rest of God (Heb 1:3)." Waltke, *Genesis*, 70.

<sup>114</sup>Hamilton, *Book of Genesis*, 165.

status as a child of God. In other words, insofar as persons serve God as his children, they are able rightly to craft culture.

In the measure that it considers more deeply its own essence, it arrives at the discovery that it is rooted in metaphysics and founded on revelation. It rests on data which God himself established, and is certain of its rights and value only because God is creator, regenerator, and consummator of all things. The creation of the first man shows this; the subduing of the earth, that is, the whole of culture, is given to him, and can be given to him, only because he is created after God's image; man can be ruler of the earth only because and in so far as he is a servant, a son of God.<sup>115</sup>

God makes the transformation of the image bearer his priority because the restored image-bearer's cultural activity will follow. Thus, culture sinks "into the background; man must first become again a son of God before he can be, in a genuine sense, a cultured being."<sup>116</sup> In other words, culture regains its status as worshipful cultivation of natural materials as individuals are restored into the family of God.

This restoration of culture coincides with the restoration of individual culture makers. Just as the sanctification of believers is gradually progressing in this life, so also does their cultural activity. One day Jesus will consummate this restoration in the lives of believers; so also will the cultural activity of the redeemed reflect this restoration.

Not only is the restoration of culture God's objective that is intricately tied to the restoration of the image, but the restoration of culture is a glorious recreation that is magnificently reflective of God's grace. The restoration of cultural activity to the way that it was originally intended is not merely a rewinding of the clock or erasure of Adam's rebellion. No, the gracious recreation of Christ is not a return to the Garden of Eden. Recreation is Eden-like, but more glorious, reflecting the progressive maturation that God's grace has produced in culture.<sup>117</sup> "The new heaven and the new earth the Lord

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<sup>115</sup>Bavinck, *Philosophy of Revelation*, 266.

<sup>116</sup>Ibid.

<sup>117</sup>"One should not think that the scriptural emphasis on restoration implies that Christians should advocate a return to the Garden of Eden, however. We have already noted that creation develops through culture and society and that this development is good and healthy. . . . We must choose *restoration*

has promised will be a continuation, purified by fire, of the creation we now know. There is no reason to believe that the cultural dimensions of earthly reality (except insofar as they are involved in sin) will be absent from the new, glorified earth that is promised.”<sup>118</sup> For this day, Christians yearn.

### **Culture under the Curse**

While Christians yearn for this day they remain enveloped in the dark truth that ever since the events of Genesis 3, culture has not been what it was created to be.<sup>119</sup> When man fell, his likeness to God and representative capabilities to craft God-glorifying culture bore sin’s mark. He no longer images God rightly by crafting culture in the same way that he once did.<sup>120</sup> His cultural activity distorts worship of the Creator into worship of the creature (Deut 4:19).<sup>121</sup>

Though culture reflects the fallenness of the world, culture is not eliminated. “The ravages of sin do not annihilate the normative creational development of civilization, but rather are parasitical upon it.”<sup>122</sup> In short, the Fall has not resulted in the

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rather than *repristination*. . . . [Christianity] views the whole course of history as a movement from a garden to a city, and it fundamentally affirms that movement.” Wolters, *Creation Regained*, 63-64.

<sup>118</sup>Wolters adds that according to Rev. 21:24, 26, “the cultural treasures of mankind will be purified by passing through the fires of judgment.” Wolters, *Creation Regained*, 40-41.

<sup>119</sup>Cornelius Plantinga emphasizes the pervasiveness of sin that is sometimes neglected, that sin is a “vandalism of shalom” that impacts every corner of our existence, corrupting and distorting the prosperity and peace of God’s original creation. Cornelius Plantinga, *Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).

<sup>120</sup>Wolters blames the Fall for bad aesthetic taste in general: in painting, music, poetry, and kitsch in the arts. Wolters, *Creation Regained*, 45.

<sup>121</sup>Greg Johnson put it this way: “The call to build human civilization has been co-opted throughout history by men and women (usually men) with giant egos seeking glory for themselves rather than God.” Johnson, *The World According to God*, 88-89.

<sup>122</sup>“Maturation and deterioration can be so intimately intertwined in reality that only scripturally directed sensitivity to the creational norm (some idea of what a healthy body is like) can hope to discern the difference.” Wolters, *Creation Regained*, 39-40.

elimination of the Cultural Mandate, the distortion of culture has not led to the destruction of culture.<sup>123</sup>

Because brokenness characterizes our current world, the bulk of this section's remainder will address the current status of culture. This section will explore this impact of the Fall on the image, how God has intervened to restrain the full effects of sin and enable fallen mankind to do "good."

That culture is not what it once was is related to the impact of the Fall on the image. The church has viewed this impact in a variety of ways throughout her history. Condemned heretic Pelagius taught that the fall did not affect the image, but that mankind possesses the same abilities that he did before the fall.<sup>124</sup> Also implausible is the later Catholic approach of defining the image and likeness differently, opening the door for the idea that we are capable of gaining true knowledge of God through reason alone and choosing what is morally correct apart from God's grace. This is implausible because it does not account for Romans 1:18, 3:11; 8:7 and Hebrews 11:6, which indicate that mankind vigorously suppresses the truth in unrighteousness, does not seek God nor please him. Whereas some dismiss or minimize sin's impact on the image, Martin Luther suggested that sin led to the elimination of the image.<sup>125</sup> However, Genesis 5:1; 9:6, 1

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<sup>123</sup>In an intramural debate among Christians, William Edgar notes that on one view, the cultural mandate was abrogated because of the Fall. People have lost the right to subdue the earth, so God has given us a different task: missions. Culture takes a back seat to the urgency of evangelism. William Edgar, *Truth in All Its Glory* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2004), 249. No such view is advocated in the Scriptures, however. Whereas before the Fall mankind plowed the innocent ground and cultivated the untainted materials of nature in worship to God, after the Fall he plowed the cursed ground and cultivated the sin-stained materials of nature in conflict. David Hegeman employs the plowing metaphor to describe humanity's prerogative to steward creation into a refined culture, even after the Fall. David Hegeman, *Plowing in Hope: Toward a Theology of Culture* (Moscow, ID: Canon, 1999). In response to the cultural mandate (Gen 1:28), just as humans are to tend to the earth to produce physical fruit that makes much of God, they are to plow in hope, transforming and refining culture according to the purpose for which it was created. As we fight the effects of sin evidenced in disorder and chaos, our culture better reflects God's purposes for the world. Our grace-empowered employment of God's good world as a means of worship to him provides a glimpse into the new heavens and new earth.

<sup>124</sup>Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1910), 3:802-09.

<sup>125</sup>Jaroslav Pelikan, ed., *Luther's Works* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1958), 1:61-63.

Corinthians 11:7; and James 3:9 indicate that man is still the image of God; Scripture affords no evidence that man has lost it.<sup>126</sup> Psalm 8 presents us a picture of man similar to that sketched in Genesis 1:27-28, that man is the highest creature God has made despite man's fall into sin.<sup>127</sup> In summary, the church generally has held that God's image in man is distorted, but not lost; we are "less fully like God than we were before the entrance of sin."<sup>128</sup>

The consequences of the Fall on the image directly correspond to the consequences for culture. Even with the continued commission to craft culture, mankind's cultural productivity would be in conflict with God from this point on, with no humanly fabricated solution to the plight.<sup>129</sup> Sin counteracts the knowledge, righteousness, and holiness of the image (Eph 4:24; Col. 3:10) though it does not erase the image.<sup>130</sup> Because of sin God is striving with men and women (Eph 4:30).<sup>131</sup> Though

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<sup>126</sup>Hoekema also comments and rebuts Klaas Schilder and G. C. Berkouwer's shared position that man no longer bears the image. See Hoekema, *Created in God's Image*, 17.

<sup>127</sup>Ibid., 19.

<sup>128</sup>Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 444. Hoekema and Grudem both note that we image God in a distorted way, but in the process of redemption the distortion is progressively removed until at Christ's return we perfectly image God. Hoekema, *Created in God's Image*, 32. Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 445. For the believer in Christ, the image is being restored and renewed.

<sup>129</sup>Cultural utopianism is certainly a temptation worth acknowledging. Even while some utopian endeavors temporarily flourish, these earthly hopes overshadow the hope of heaven and may even lead some to expect heaven on earth. Few have expressed the deceitfulness of such an approach better than C. S. Lewis. "When they want to convince you that earth is your home, notice how they go about it. They begin by trying to persuade you that earth can be made into heaven, thus giving a sop to your sense of exile on earth as it is. Next, they tell you that this fortunate event is still a good way off in the future, thus giving a sop to your knowledge that the fatherland is not here and now. Finally, lest your longing for the transtemporal should awake and spoil the whole affair, they use any rhetoric that comes to hand to keep out of your mind the recollection that even if all the happiness they promised could come to man on earth, yet still each generation would lose it by death, including the last generation of all, and the story would lie nothing, not even a story, forever and ever." C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory* (New York: HarperOne, 2001), 8. Lewis's reference was specifically directed to secular utopianism but his application is equally relevant to cultural utopianism.

<sup>130</sup>John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Word of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2010), 316. Frame also points to his longer discussions on the image of God in *Salvation Belongs to the Lord: An Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2006), 85-99; idem, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*

God is currently keeping men and women alive while yet convicting of sin, the day will come when this striving will cease<sup>132</sup> (Gen 6:3; Acts 7:51). God's withdrawal is described in Romans 1:28-32 as God giving those who reject him over to a reprobate mind and vile affections. Though no culture is ever outside the overruling power of God, sometimes God allows it to take itself to destruction (Rev 6). The ongoing presence of sin reminds us that God's work of redeeming the cosmos currently is done in conflict and finally will one day be ushered in by judgment.

In light of the Fall and its impact on the image as well as God's curse and its evident effect at Babel and Sodom and Gomorrah, we come to a dismal conclusion about culture: it is riddled with sin and reflects rebellion against God. The monument to man's ego and self-sufficiency at Babel is a dramatic representation of culture affected by sin. Whereas culture was originally intended to worship God by rightly staging truth about God and reality it is now impaired. The product of the human heart inextricably reveals it to be in conflict and rebellion with the Creator. Image bearers fail to image God as in the beginning. The Fall corrupted culture as worship to God, replacing it with self-gratifying autonomy. The gifts of creation that God gives to humanity are not accepted by humanity as from the hand of God, but as if they were rightfully hers. Though creation rightly belongs to God, we dispute the title of ownership as if it were ours.

God had provided the world with a fresh start by destroying civilization with a flood; but this generation's fresh start did not equal a clean slate. Mankind still bore the sin of its father, Adam. His attempts at refining the raw materials of nature into a window revealing God's character often garbled God's revelation into a wall obscuring it. Myers notes that human culture was not getting off to a very good start after the Flood and

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(Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008), 318-23, 623-30.

<sup>131</sup>Lloyd-Jones, *Great Doctrines of the Bible*, 2:27.

<sup>132</sup>*Ibid.*, 27.



rainbow: upon venturing from the ark, the father of all subsequent mankind quickly got drunk and passed out naked in his tent.<sup>133</sup> Before the reader gets too enamored with in the idea of a fresh start for mankind and cultural utopianism, we are reminded that we are not ushering in a restored Eden.<sup>134</sup>

Even Israel—who was called to be a holy people that would exhibit holiness within its culture to those peoples outside as a light for the nations (Isa 49:6)—experienced the effects of sin on their culture. They did not image God rightly as Adam and Eve did in the Garden, evidencing this by their constant swing between the two poles of God’s judgment in slavery and God’s blessing in freedom. God’s intention was that Israel’s holy culture would provide a glimpse backward into the holy culture that preexisted them in the Garden<sup>135</sup> and a glimpse forward into the holy culture that God would one day consummate through the kingly reign of his Son. Meanwhile, the curse of sin affected every human relationship, thought and deed.

However, even in the curse, God extended his mercy by positioning man against the serpent: “Man in sinning had sided with the serpent and placed himself in opposition to God. Now the attitude towards the serpent becomes one of hostility; this must carry with it a corresponding change in man’s attitude towards God. God being the mover in the warfare against Satan, man, joining in this, becomes plainly the ally of God.”<sup>136</sup> At this stage, if man were left to himself he surely and justly would be handed over for destruction by God to be consumed by Satan.

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<sup>133</sup>Myers, *All God’s Children & Blue Suede Shoes*, 47.

<sup>134</sup>Myers later states this strongly: “It is most certainly *not* the mandate for all humanity to be struggling to build a holy community or commonwealth. Not even the *people of God* in our epoch of redemptive history are called to create a holy culture, because Christians are called to go out into every culture with the gospel.” *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>135</sup>*Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>136</sup>Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 42.

God in his mercy invited man to wage war against the serpent, to turn from rebellion and return to walking in faith-filled obedience to God. This gracious and hope-filled promise implies that man's spiritual activity of culture making would not end, but would continue. As Myers notes, "the curse not only contained the seeds of salvation; it also assumed that God's providence in creation would allow human culture to continue, even though man was now alienated from God, the model for his cultural activity."<sup>137</sup> Though he deserved far worse, man was not chained to a rock, consigned to a cave or outer space<sup>138</sup>; he was graciously given continued access to the world and its goods, with the continued commission to craft the raw materials of nature into something meaningful that staged truth for God's glory. Indeed, "Culture is part of the very fabric of who man is and what he is to be about in this world, and the fall has not changed this."<sup>139</sup>

God-enabled good still finds its expression in human culture, even that which is unregenerate.<sup>140</sup> God enables even pagan people to develop the raw elements of nature and positively contribute to the fulfillment of the cultural mandate. As Bavinck notes, the Canaanites invented all sorts of things, thriving soon after the Fall (Gen 4:17).<sup>141</sup> The people who settled in the plains of Shinar after the flood soon achieved a high level of culture. Bavinck points out further, "the quality of the civilization which we find in the land of Shinar, insofar as science and art, morality and jurisprudence, commerce and industry are concerned, reached a height which, the more we come to know it from excavations, fill us with amazement."<sup>142</sup> Nimrod founded Babel. The murderer cursed by

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<sup>137</sup>Myers, *All God's Children & Blue Suede Shoes*, 43.

<sup>138</sup>Ibid.

<sup>139</sup>Gardoski, "Is Culture a Reflection of the *Imago Dei*?" 18.

<sup>140</sup>Vanhoozer, *Everyday Theology*, 26.

<sup>141</sup>Herman Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), 53.

<sup>142</sup>Ibid., 55.

God, Cain, and his family lived under God’s judgment yet they continued to be producers of fine culture. Genesis 4 tells us that Cain built a city and raised livestock. His son Jubal was the father of all who play the harp and flute. Tubal-cain was the forger of all kinds of tools out of bronze and iron. God’s grace was still on them, even in the midst of their rebellion.<sup>143</sup> Post-Fall cultural activity is not merely characteristic of the regenerate, but the unregenerate. In this post-Fall account, cultural activity continues for the good and the bad and consequently reflects both goodness and evil. Wenham notes this tension by pointing out the simultaneous “development of technology and arts on the one hand and the growth of violence on the other.”<sup>144</sup> Culture reflects both development and corruption; Gardoski helpfully identifies the pattern in Scripture that cultural activity does not cease, but grows.<sup>145</sup>

Even though we are unable to restore human culture to its original holiness, we should not dismiss its value entirely.<sup>146</sup> Whereas a culture may not be holy as it was in the

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<sup>143</sup>Interestingly, Seth’s family—though they walked in obedience to God—is not particularly noted for their cultural contributions.

<sup>144</sup>Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 116.

<sup>145</sup>“In spite of man’s sinfulness, the cultural elements of Genesis 4 are not evil in and of themselves, as later Scriptures bear out. Building cities is not evil. God builds cities (Heb 11:10; Rev 21:2). Marriage and families are not evil. Children are a gift from God (Ps 127:3), and marriage is honorable and its bed undefiled (Heb 13:4). Dwelling in tents and herding livestock are not evil. God Himself dwelt in a tent among men (2 Sam 7:6), and gave animals to man for sacrifice (Gen 4:4) and food (9:3). Musical instruments are not evil. God is praised with the music of man-made instruments (Ps 150:3–5). Forging metal is not evil. With various metals God’s tabernacle was constructed (Exod 38:21–31), and plowshares and pruning hooks will be the implements of God’s kingdom (Isa 2:4). Developing legal systems is not evil. God gave Moses His law for Israel (Exod 20–23), and we are under Christ’s law (1 Cor 9:21) as well as human governing authorities by divine command (Rom 13:1–7). . . . Likewise, returning to the cultural elements of Genesis 4, it is the building of cities for self- glorification that God condemns (Gen 11:4–8). It is the breaking of the marriage covenant that God hates (Exod 20:14; Mal 2:16). It is the coveting and stealing of another’s possessions (Exod 20:16, 17) and the improper use of animals (Gen 9:4) that God forbids. It is music employed for debauchery and idolatry that God condemns (Exod 32:6, 18–19; Dan 3:14–18). It is metal idols (Isa 46:5–7) and murder weapons (Matt 26:52) that God forbids. It is unjust laws (Isa 10:1) and unjust judges (Deut 16:19) that God hates.” Gardoski, “Is Culture a Reflection of the *Imago Dei*?” 18-19.

<sup>146</sup>Wolters has winsomely argued for a *structure/direction* distinction, regarding the impact of the Fall. He argues that culture’s direction can either be sinful (he defines sinful direction as distortion and perversion) or redeemed and restored, though its structure (the order of creation, the constant creational

beginning, because of God's continued restraint of evil and enablement of good, it serves a useful function, both positively and negatively. God enables us to live in a world that is less evil than it would be otherwise while enabling a culture to speak truth, even though he does not eliminate the distorting effects of sin on the revelation that culture articulates. Scripture leads us to believe that God's grace rests on all people, and that this grace enables even pagan culture to retain epistemological value.

**Common grace.** This scriptural case that God restrains evil and enables good has been summarized in the doctrine of common grace.<sup>147</sup> The concept of common grace possesses not the clear lines of demarcation and delineation that some other doctrines of the church have received.<sup>148</sup> Some reject its name while receiving its contribution as a concept<sup>149</sup>; others reject the idea altogether.<sup>150</sup>

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constitution of anything, what makes it the thing or entity that it is) remains the same. In the case of culture, its structure is good but its direction can be perverted in a sinful direction. "To the degree that [cultural realities] fail to live up to God's creational design for them, they are misdirected, abnormal, distorted. To the degree that they still conform to God's design, they are in the grip of a countervailing force that curbs or counteracts the distortion." Wolters, *Creation Regained*, 49-52.

<sup>147</sup>Van Til points out that this doctrine of common grace helps the Christian to live with proper balance in the world. "Going off to the right by denying common grace or going off to the left by affirming a theory of common grace patterned after the natural theology of Rome is to fail, to this extent, to challenge the wisdom of the world." Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 147.

<sup>148</sup>Berkhof attributes this to the fact that the rise and prevalence of rationalism made it necessary to place all emphasis on special grace. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 434. Cornelius Van Til encourages those who would enter this discussion to realize that this question of common grace "admits of no easy and simple solution. . . . This is a reason for common humility and mutual forbearance." Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1972), 12-13.

<sup>149</sup>John Frame, for example, suggests that "it would perhaps be better to speak of God's common goodness, or common love, rather than his common grace." John Frame, *The Doctrine of God: A Theology of Lordship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2002), 429-30. This critique affords a necessary and helpful talking point. One should remain open to the possibility of using alternative terminology. This dissertation will employ the widely embraced term, "common grace."

<sup>150</sup>Masselink traced opposition to common grace in America to the Christian Reformed Church and a schism that resulted. Masselink, *General Revelation and Common Grace*, 189. In more recent years Schilder led a movement called "Reconstructionism" in the Netherlands. Herman Hoeksema defends the front lines in the war on the doctrine of common grace. He does not believe that we should take the good things that are visited upon the lives of the ungodly as grace, *per se*. His critique is two-fold. First, Hoeksema's critique of common grace theology is driven in large part by the concern that the line between the church and the world will disappear. Commonality emphasis inevitably results in the "obliteration of

The purpose of this section is to explore the doctrine of common grace, particularly its impact on our understanding of culture's value for the theologian.<sup>151</sup> The

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the distinction between the Church and the world, light and darkness, Christ and Belial, righteousness and unrighteousness.” Hoeksema, *Protestant Reformed Churches*, 92, 313. Labadist tendencies are those that harshly criticized the worldliness of the larger reformed body. Cf. F. Ernest Stoeffler, *The Rise of Evangelical Pietism, Studies in the History of Religions*, vol. 9 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1965), 162-69. For accusations of Labadism among the Dutch Reformed in North America, see James Tanis, *Dutch Calvinist Pietism in the Middle Colonies: A Study in the Life and Theology of Theodorus Jacobus Frelinghuysen* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1967), 143-45, 151, 159; and William O. Van Eyck, *Landmarks of the Reformed Fathers, or What Dr. Van Raalte's People Believed* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Press, 1922), 189, 196. Hoeksema's second reaction to the doctrine of common grace centers on the empirical evidence in the world. If indeed we are counting on common grace to help make the world better, a casual glance around us leads us to believe that it is not very effective. He notes that after a century of common grace teaching, the world and the church have gotten worse. David J. Engelsma, “The Reformed Worldview: 3. The Failure of Common Grace (cont.),” *The Standard Bearer* (September 1998), 462. Richard Mouw observes the same. “If we are to judge common grace teachings by looking for fruits of righteousness in the larger culture . . . then we must admit to some serious shortcomings.” Richard Mouw, *He Shines in All That's Fair: Culture and Common Grace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 27. Common grace is not making a difference in our world; instead of evidencing *increased* levels of goodness cultures are evidencing *decreased* levels of goodness. Hoeksema's concerns are legitimate, but do not necessitate denial of common grace doctrine in the way that this dissertation embraces it. First, the purpose of common grace is not to resolve the antithesis between the gospel and the fallen world. This dissertation will argue in chapter four that this antithesis must be preserved. The Gospel confronts the unregenerate even while instances of epistemological value persist in their culture. Common grace does not lead us to obliterate distinctions between Christ and the world, but to identify them with discernment and then confront them with conviction. Indeed, Scripture does not give us license for antinomian ethics merely because common grace provides a common operating sphere in which regenerate and unregenerate live. Secondly, the purpose of common grace is not to redeem the world or to increase progressively its levels of goodness. Scripture teaches that though God is presently restraining sin in the world he has not promised to remove sin from the world immediately. The reconciliation of the world does not come through common grace, but special grace, the work of Christ on the cross (Col 1:15-20). With Hoeksema, this form of common grace should be rejected. Also consider Berkhof's countering of four objections in his chapter on common grace: (1) The doctrine of common grace does not go far enough. (2) The doctrine of common grace leads into the Arminian camp because it involves the doctrine of universal atonement. (3) The doctrine of common grace wrongly assumes a favorable disposition of God to reprobate sinners. (4) The doctrine of common grace involves the recognition of good elements in the natural order of things. This is contrary to the supernatural order of things that Christ established. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 444-46.

<sup>151</sup>Many questions related to common grace lie outside the scope of this dissertation. Of utmost importance are the relationship between common grace and the atoning work of Christ and the relationship between special grace and common grace. Regarding the atonement, Berkhof helpfully suggests that “these general blessings of mankind, indirectly resulting from the atoning work of Christ, were not only foreseen by God, but designed by Him as blessings for all concerned. It is perfectly true, of course, that the design of God in the work of Christ pertained primarily and directly, not to the temporal well-being of men in

general, but to the redemption of the elect; but secondarily and indirectly it also included the natural blessings bestowed on mankind indiscriminately. All that the natural man receives other than curse and death is an indirect result of the redemptive work of Christ.” Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 438-39. He also concluded, “common grace finds its purpose in part in the redemptive work of Jesus Christ. Ibid. 440. Van Til concurs, “Common grace must support special or saving grace; saving or special grace cannot be adequately presented except in relationship to and in connection with common grace.” Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 125; see particularly 99-125 for his development and defense of this idea.

doctrine of common grace “responds to the question many have about our world: ‘How does the world go on after sin’s entrance and how is it possible that “good” things emerge from the hands of humans within and without a covenant relationship with God?’”<sup>152</sup> The early development of the idea finds its roots in Calvin.<sup>153</sup> Others, such as John Murray and Abraham Kuyper, have expanded the concept and its application. More recently, Fuller Theological Seminary president Richard Mouw has devoted much theological and philosophical attention to this subject.<sup>154</sup> Particularly, Mouw argues for a robust doctrine of common-grace that responds to this important series of questions: are “salvific categories adequate to cover all of God’s dispositions toward human beings, both redeemed and unredeemed[?] More specifically, is the ultimate destiny of human beings the only thing that God thinks about in assessing what we think, feel, and do? Does he care about the actions and achievements of non-elect persons in a way that is not linked directly to issues of individual salvation? These questions are at the heart of common grace.”<sup>155</sup>

A cursory glance at Scripture reveals that the ultimate destiny of human beings is not God’s only concern, or the only development worthy of assessment.<sup>156</sup> For example, when God created the world he made a positive aesthetic judgment prior even

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<sup>152</sup>Kuyper, *Wisdom and Wonder*, 26.

<sup>153</sup>For a book length treatment of Calvin’s views on common grace, see Herman Kuiper, *Calvin on Common Grace* (n.p.: Smitter, 1928).

<sup>154</sup>His conclusions regarding the nature of election and the inclusion of the Mormon church in the Christian faith are rejected by confessional evangelicals, though his contributions to common grace are helpful.

<sup>155</sup>Mouw, *He Shines in All That’s Fair*, 33.

<sup>156</sup>“Although God directs his goodness and love especially to believers, there are also senses in which God’s goodness and love are universal.” Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 429. Herman Hoeksema disagrees. For him “in the counsel of God all other things in heaven and on earth are designed as means to the realization of both election and reprobation, and therefore, of the glory of Christ and His church.” Herman Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1966), 165.

to the presence of human beings. The goodness of creation was not contingent on the eternal salvation or damnation of persons. In other words, God rejoices in what he has made (Ps 104:31). Psalms claims that God rejoices without reference to elect and non-elect human beings. He is “good to all” (Ps 145:9). Mouw contends, “if God is glorified by his non-human creation—which seems to be a fairly modest claim to endorse—then it seems reasonable to assume that God takes delight in those non-human created phenomena. And then it also seems to be quite plausible to assume that God takes delight in various *human* states of affairs, even when they are displayed in the lives of non-elect human beings.”<sup>157</sup> A study of God’s Word reveals that God does display his favor on the unregenerate for a time,<sup>158</sup> even though this favor is not salvific.<sup>159</sup>

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<sup>157</sup>Mouw, *He Shines in All That’s Fair*, 35. Additionally, his delight in various states of affairs does not preclude the fact that he simultaneously grieves at some aspects of human states of affair.

<sup>158</sup>This point of discussion regarding God’s favor on the unregenerate has garnered much attention from opponents of common grace. Van Til offers helpful analysis when he suggests that God’s favor on the unregenerate is temporary in a similar way that God’s displeasure on the regenerate is temporary. Thus, he speaks of common grace as “earlier grace.” In other words, distinction of date diversifies God’s attitude to be favorable and unfavorable to the same person at different times. When Adam sinned all men *became* sinners and became the objects of God’s wrath. Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 30-32. “We need not hesitate to affirm, then, that in the beginning God loved mankind in general. . . . A little later God hated mankind in general. . . . So the elect and the reprobate are under a *common wrath*. . . . Indeed, the reality of the ‘common wrath’ depends upon the fact of the earlier ‘common grace.’” Van Til continues this discussion to include the well-meant offer of salvation as one of God’s common graces. “We must not fear to assert that though the ultimate end of God for the elect is their salvation, they yet are under God’s displeasure when they do not fully live up to His requirement for men. Similarly we must not fear to assert in the case of the reprobate that though they are ultimately vessels of wrath they yet can be in history, in a sense, the objects of the favor of God.” *Ibid.*, 74-75, 166. Gary North criticized Van Til heavily, regarding his belief that God favors the unregenerate. He denied that God shows any favor to the reprobate. Gary North, *Dominion and Common Grace: The Biblical Basis of Progress* (Tyler, TX: Christian Liberty, 1987). North also regards *Common Grace and the Gospel* as “without question the worst book [Van Til] ever wrote. It is also one of the most confusing books he ever wrote, granted the relative simplicity of the topic.” North, *Dominion and Common Grace*, 9, quoted in Frame, *Cornelius Van Til*, 228.

<sup>159</sup>This dissertation follows a Calvinistic and Kuyperian rendering, which defines common grace more broadly. John Frame directs the reader to be aware of a narrower view found in Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 2:654, and in A. A. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1972), 28:13. Frame also points to John Murray’s discussion in his article, “Common Grace,” in his *Collected Writings of John Murray* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1977), 2:93-119. John Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 430 n. 43. Van Til charged Kuyper with “thinking abstractly,” rather than biblically, as he does. Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 34, 229. James Daane charges Van Til with the same in his book-length critique of Van Til’s doctrine of common grace, James Daane, *A Theology of Grace* (Grand Rapids:

Over the years, many have agreed with this preliminary conclusion and defined common grace similarly. Kuyper asserts,

For not only did God create all men, not only is He for all men, but His grace also extends itself, not only as a special grace, to the elect, but also as a common grace (*gratia communis*) to all mankind. To be sure, there is a concentration of religious light and life in the Church but then in the walls of this church there are wide open windows, and through these spacious windows the light of the Eternal has to radiate over the whole world. . . . And even he who does not yet imbibe the higher light, or maybe shuts his eyes to it, is nevertheless admonished, with equal emphasis, and in all things, to give glory to the name of the Lord.”<sup>160</sup>

Michael Horton defines it as “God’s bestowal of a variety of gifts and blessings on Christians and non-Christians alike, such as health, intelligence, friendship, vocation, family, government, art, science, etc. Common grace upholds fallen humanity, but it is not saving.”<sup>161</sup> Vincent Bacote emphasizes three effects: “God’s restraint of the full effects of sin after the Fall, preservation and maintenance of the created order, and distribution of talents to human beings.”<sup>162</sup> Grudem defines common grace more loosely as the “grace of God by which he gives people innumerable blessings that are not part of salvation.”<sup>163</sup>

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Eerdmans, 1954). Frame identifies Daane’s charge, but after analysis mostly sides with Van Til. “Van Til has sometimes been accused of criticizing others unfairly on the absence of his speculative reconstructions of philosophical categories supposedly underlying their thought. If those accusations are true, then in *A Theology of Grace* Daane has given Van Til a dose of his own medicine! . . . Daane makes the mistake of elevating jokes, obiter dicta, and unfortunate misstatements to the status of programmatic pronouncements. Then he rather violently forces everything else Van Til says into the mold of this alleged philosophical program.” Frame, *Cornelius Van Til*, 224-25. If these back and forth accusations illustrate anything, they illustrate that the danger of speculation regarding common grace apart from Scripture is acute.

<sup>160</sup>Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism: The Stone Lectures of 1898* (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2009), 63-64.

<sup>161</sup>Horton, *The Christian Faith*, 992. Also see Grudem’s similar definition of common grace: “Common grace is the grace of God by which he gives people innumerable blessings that are not part of salvation.” Grudem helpfully highlights the commonly understood distinction between common grace and saving grace. Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 657.

<sup>162</sup>Vincent Bacote, “Introduction,” in Abraham Kuyper, *Wisdom and Wonder*, 26.

<sup>163</sup>Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 657. Masselink also defines common grace loosely. “Every favor of God bestowed upon creation and all mankind which falls short of salvation.” Masselink, *General Revelation and Common Grace*, 210.



Bavinck issued a needed and helpful caution that clarifies the intent of common grace: common grace “compels but it does not change; it restrains but does not conquer. . . . To save the world, nothing less was needed than the immeasurable greatness of the divine power, the working of his great might which he accomplished in Christ when he raised him from the dead and made him sit at his right hand in the heavenly places” (Eph 1:19, 20).<sup>164</sup> Most theologians agree: without renewing the heart,<sup>165</sup> God universally exercises a moral influence that restrains sin, maintains order and promotes civility.<sup>166</sup>

Though a thorough examination of common grace is beyond the scope of this dissertation, two particular distinctives of common grace merit a biblical examination, explanation and application: (1) God restrains sin, and (2) God enables mankind to do “good.”<sup>167</sup> The contention that culture retains positive epistemological value finds its grounding in this scriptural teaching: God universally restrains culture-makers from being as evil as they could be and universally enables culture-makers to do “good.”

First, God restrains sin and his wrath. Scripture affords much evidence that God graciously restrains sin from having its full effect on mankind, even for those who

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<sup>164</sup>Herman Bavinck, “Common Grace,” trans. Raymond C. Van Leeuwen, *Calvin Theological Journal* 24 (1992): 61.

<sup>165</sup>Louis Berkhof—in addressing a Reformed view of common grace—“carefully distinguishes common grace from that of the Arminians, who regard common grace as a link in the *ordo salutis* and ascribe to it *saving* significance.” Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1941), 437.

<sup>166</sup>Lloyd-Jones, *Great Doctrines of the Bible*, 2:24.

<sup>167</sup>Masselink attributes this two-fold summary of common grace to Kuyper. (1) The negative element through which God restrains the effects of sin. (2) The positive element of God’s work upon all mankind by which civil righteousness is promoted. Masselink, *General Revelation and Common Grace*, 188. Van Til notes that this reflects a development in Kuyper’s thought process: in volume one Kuyper treats common grace primarily in a negative sense, in that it restrains sin. In volume two Kuyper treats common grace primarily in a positive sense, in that it enables good. “It looks as though Kuyper’s conception of common grace grew gradually in his own mind to include a positive as well as a negative aspect.” Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 15.

do not believe in him.<sup>168</sup> Jesus restrained sin from having its full effect on those whom he healed. He did not require that all of those whom he healed believe in him or agree that he was the Messiah before he granted them physical healing (Luke 4:40).<sup>169</sup>

He also restrains radically depraved men from fully acting out the depravity of their heart.<sup>170</sup> He set a mark on Cain to restrain men from killing him (Gen 4:15). God restrained the pagan king Abimelech from adding Sarah to his harem. God then promised Abimelech that Abraham would pray for him so that he would live (Gen 20:7); “this restraint of sin was a gracious act on God’s part.”<sup>171</sup> He restrained Egypt in Exodus 1-15 and King Sennacherib of Assyria in 2 Kings 19:27-28 from doing further harm to Israel. Satan is limited by God (Job 1:12; 2:6). God providentially restrains sin and evil in the world for his purposes.

Romans 1:24-28 uses language that gives strong indication that God is actively restraining sinners from the full effects of their sin, but he comes to a point in which he gives them over (*paredoken*) to worse and worse sins. The aorist tense indicates that there were specific times when God gave them over.<sup>172</sup> Implied is that previous to the giving over was the ongoing restraint of the manifestation of sin.<sup>173</sup> Charles Hodge summarized

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<sup>168</sup>Jonathan Edwards forcefully expressed this sentiment in his sermon “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.” “There are in the souls of wicked men those hellish principles reigning, that would presently kindle and flame out into hell-fire, if it were not for God’s restraints. . . . For the present God restrains their wickedness by his mighty power, as he does the raging waves of the troubled sea, saying, ‘hitherto shalt thou come, and no further’; but if God should withdraw that restraining power, it would soon carry all before it.” Jonathan Edwards, “Sinner in the Hands of an Angry God,” <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/edwards/sermons.sinners.html> (accessed December 17, 2012).

<sup>169</sup>Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 662.

<sup>170</sup>Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 430.

<sup>171</sup>Hoekema, *Created in God’s Image*, 194.

<sup>172</sup>Ibid. See also William D. Mounce, *A Graded Reader of Biblical Greek* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 174-75, for caution regarding overstatement of the implications in interpreting a given usage of the aorist tense.

<sup>173</sup>Ibid., 195.

this idea: “He [God] withdraws from the wicked the restraints of his providence and grace, and gives them over to the dominion of sin.”<sup>174</sup> Frame specifically notes the Flood as an example of God’s restraint giving way to his withdrawal, in which human sin grew worse and worse until God was grieved that he had made man (Gen 6:5).<sup>175</sup>

Additionally, Hoekema points to the restraint of sin by the government as a work of God. God—through the means of human rulers—is actively restraining sin (Rom 13:3-4; 1 Pet 2:13-14).<sup>176</sup> Grudem concurs, stating that an inward sense of conscience bestowed by God “leads people to establish laws and customs in society that are, in terms of the outward behavior they approve or prohibit, quite like the moral laws of Scripture.”<sup>177</sup> In essence, God restrains all individuals to some degree even though he does not cleanse them.<sup>178</sup> God restrains man’s evil internally through his conscience and externally through the government.

He not only restrains sin and evil, but he restrains his wrath upon those who are evil. God would have been just to destroy permanently the entire human race after the Fall. In his patience, God sometimes overlooks disobedience (Acts 17:30; cf. 14:16; Rom 3:25).<sup>179</sup> As Grudem describes, though human beings are liable to the wrath of God (Gen

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<sup>174</sup>Charles Hodge, quoted in Hoekema, *Image*, 195.

<sup>175</sup>Frame also cites the example of the inhabitants of Canaan becoming worse and worse until God judged them by giving their land to Israel (Gen 15:16). Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 430.

<sup>176</sup>Hoekema, *Created in God’s Image*, 195.

<sup>177</sup>E.g., sanctity of marriage and the family, protecting human life, or prohibiting theft and falsehood in speech. Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 660.

<sup>178</sup>John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, Library of Christian Classics (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1960), 2.3.3. “But here it ought to occur to us that amid this corruption of nature there is some place for God’s grace; not such grace as to cleanse it, but to restrain it inwardly. . . . Thus God by his providence bridles perversity of nature, that it may not break forth into action; but he does not purge it within.” See also Hoekema, *Created in God’s Image*, 187-202.

<sup>179</sup>“In the Old Testament period, he permitted divorce because of Israel’s hardness of heart (Matt 19:8), even though he hates divorce.” Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 431.

2:17; Rom 6:23) as the angels received when they sinned (2 Peter 2:4), God delays the execution of our sentence of death for many years.<sup>180</sup> He currently holds his wrath back from full dispensation, providing people an opportunity to repent and believe in Christ (2 Pet 3:9; cf. Rev 2:21). He continues to bless sinners who deserve only death with his patience, even to those who will never be saved.<sup>181</sup>

Second, God enables good. Not only does God's common grace restrain sin, but also it enables "goodness." On one positive level, God favorably disposes himself toward creation (Pss 65:5-13; 104). Additionally, every person passively *experiences* temporal goodness in the world; God sends sunshine and rain on both the righteous and the unrighteous (Matt 5:44-45), providing food and satisfying every living thing (Ps 145:9, 15-16). The Egyptians were ungodly, but God blessed them for Joseph's sake (Gen 39:5). Lazarus's rich tormenter received "good things" in his earthly life (Luke 16:25). He has left a witness to himself through acts of kindness in nature, such as rain and bountiful crops, resulting in full bellies and happiness (Acts 14:17).

However, on another level (that is immediately pertinent to this discussion) God's goodness enables people actively to *accomplish* good things.<sup>182</sup> This claim must be nuanced carefully, however. In one sense, without God's saving grace, one absolutely cannot do good. "Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God" (Rom 8:8). Man's nature is too corrupt to expect any true good in one sense, because no one can do

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<sup>180</sup>Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 657.

<sup>181</sup>Ibid.

<sup>182</sup>Heslam phrased this element of common grace like this: "Yet common grace could not stop at this first and constant operation. Mere maintenance and control affords no answer to the question as to what end the world is to be preserved and why it has passed throughout a history of ages. If things remain the same what should life be continues at all. . . . Accordingly there is added to this first constant operation of common grace...another, wholly different, operation . . . calculated to make human life and the life of the whole world pass through a process and develop itself more fully and richly." Peter S. Heslam, *Creating a Christian Worldview: Abraham Kuyper's Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 17.

good (Rom 3:9-20). That which does not spring from faith is sin (Rom 14:23); it is not done out of love for God but love of self.

In another sense, however, the Bible speaks of actions that are good, when the outward act is acceptable but the heart is corrupt (2 Kgs 10:29, 30; 12:2; 14:3; Luke 6:33). Jehu was an idol worshipper (2 Kgs 10:29) but he pleased God and procured God's temporal favor by treating Ahab as God had directed him (2 Kgs 10:30). Jesus attributed love and goodness to publicans and sinners (Matt 5:46; Luke 6:33). In this outward sense, some actions of the unregenerate are good. God delights in these good actions wherever they may be found because he is good. John Barber said, "I would even venture to say that because the cultural labor of unregenerate men is vitally important to the forward progress of the world, and to God's long-range redemptive scheme, and because that labor stems from gifts that God has given, the product of unregenerate culture is pleasing to God."<sup>183</sup> God does not approve of the moral quality of the unbeliever's actions though he finds delight in the effects of his common grace.

This discussion concerning the "goodness" of man in culture is of particular interest in the Reformed tradition. At first glance, the Reformed tradition—as expressed by the Heidelberg Catechism—might seem to oppose the idea that the unregenerate are capable of good. It states that apart from the regenerating grace of God we are incapable of "any good."<sup>184</sup> The Canons of Dort, however, nuance this understanding by stating that we are all "by nature children of wrath, incapable of any saving good."<sup>185</sup> This distinction between "any good" and "any saving good" is vital. Some of the works of the unregenerate could be considered as "good" without being considered salvific.

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<sup>183</sup>John Barber, "Common Grace: A Critical Assessment of the Doctrine," [http://www.johnjbarber.com/wp-content/uploads/2009/08/common\\_grace.pdf](http://www.johnjbarber.com/wp-content/uploads/2009/08/common_grace.pdf) (accessed February 7, 2013), 155.

<sup>184</sup>Heidelberg Catechism, "Question and Answer 8," in *The Creeds of Christendom with a History and Critical Notes*, ed. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 3:310.

<sup>185</sup>Canons of Dort, "Article 3," in *The Creeds of Christendom with a History and Critical Notes*, ed. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 3:588.

The Westminster Confession of Faith preserves this tension.

Works done by unregenerate men, although for the matter of them they may be things which God commands, and of good use both to themselves and others, yet because they proceed not from a heart purified by faith, nor are done in a right manner, according to the Word, nor to a right end, the glory of God; they are therefore sinful, and cannot please God, or make a man meet to receive grace from God. And yet their neglect of them is more sinful and displeasing to God.<sup>186</sup>

Though the unregenerate man is unable to take steps toward salvation through a series of good works empowered by common grace, he is able to do things that God commands even though it is not finally pleasing to God. In other words, God enjoys the revelation of his grace in their actions while disapproving of the rebellion that motivates the unbeliever to action.<sup>187</sup>

This claim that common grace is distributed to all is not a claim of equal distribution. Calvin suggested that common grace is “given to all men, though not to all in equal measure.”<sup>188</sup> We have no scriptural warrant to suggest that common grace is a natural reality given to all men equally. Grudem speaks about artisan, musical, culinary, and literary skills as a result of common grace, noting that these skills are “sometimes poured out on unbelievers even more abundantly than on believers.”<sup>189</sup> He identifies a sentiment expressed similarly by Calvin. “The most certain and easy solution of this question, however, is, that those virtues are not the common properties of nature, but the peculiar graces of God, which he dispenses in great variety, and in a certain degree to men that are otherwise profane.”<sup>190</sup> Thus, though the enablement for good varies, it is present, nonetheless.

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<sup>186</sup>Westminster Confession of Faith, “Chapter XVI, Article 7,” in *The Creeds of Christendom with a History and Critical Notes*, ed. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 3:636.

<sup>187</sup>Murray adds, “The ploughing of the wicked is sin, but it is more sinful for the wicked not to plough.” Murray, “Common Grace,” 107.

<sup>188</sup>Meeter and Marshall, *The Basic Ideas of Calvinism*, 53.

<sup>189</sup>Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 661.

<sup>190</sup>Calvin, *Institutes* 3.3.4.

The positive epistemological value of human culture rests upon a further contention, that all people of all time possess revelation of God, thus they know truth. Scripture attributes knowledge to unbelievers. That God has revealed truth concerning himself and the world generally is one particular benefit of his common grace. William Masselink explores this close relationship in *General Revelation and Common Grace*. Bavinck expressed this idea that God graces mankind and his cultural content with general revelation this way: there exists “a rich revelation of God even among the heathen—not only in nature but also in their heart and conscience, in their life and history, among their statesmen and artists, their philosophers and reformers. There exists no reason at all to denigrate or diminish this divine revelation.”<sup>191</sup> That the heathen possess truth-content is not entirely different than what the common grace of general revelation entails.<sup>192</sup>

**General revelation.** One of the benefits of common grace is general revelation.<sup>193</sup> Essentially, God has disclosed himself generally to all people; this knowledge of God comes through both natural creation and the makeup of the human creature.<sup>194</sup> All people of all time see God’s self-disclosure in the cosmos, and all people

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<sup>191</sup>Bavinck, “Common Grace,” 41.

<sup>192</sup>Though Masselink helpfully points out that equating general revelation with common grace is a mistake, for four reasons: (1) there is a difference in origin. General revelation existed before the fall of man. Common grace came after the fall. (2) There is a difference in purpose: general revelation is to reveal God to us. Common grace is to curb the penetration of sin and to make the development of the cosmos possible. (3) Our knowledge of common grace is derived from special revelation. (4) They are related because in common grace God uses the truths of general revelation to restrain sin. Masselink, *General Revelation and Common Grace*, 70.

<sup>193</sup>“The light of God’s revelation that shines in nature and lightens every man coming into the world . . . is itself the fruit of common grace.” Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 440.

<sup>194</sup>Russell D. Moore, “Natural Revelation,” in *A Theology for the Church*, ed. Daniel L. Akin (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2007), 71. Bavinck categorizes general revelation a bit more intricately into six groupings: the physical world, its unity and harmony, the God-consciousness of all men, the moral conscience of all men, religious experience, and the governance of human history by a supreme being. Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith*, 40-41. General and special revelation are different with regard to their scope and extent: general revelation is extended to all people and communicates God’s existence, whereas

are expected to respond with thanksgiving, adoration and a confession of dependence.<sup>195</sup> Furthermore, all people of all time experience God's grace in the human moral consciousness and the uniqueness of man, and are expected to live in accordance with this awareness.<sup>196</sup> Luther recognized that "God in his essence is present everywhere, in and through the whole creation in all its parts and in all places, and so the world is full of God and he fills it all, yet he is not limited or circumscribed by it."<sup>197</sup> Because God in his essence is present everywhere in a knowable manner, all people of all time have access to this knowledge.

God is not obligated to reveal himself to all people. Thus, "we cannot credit a knowledge of God to ourselves, to our own discovery, investigation, or reflection. If it were not given us by an act of free and unobliged favor, there would be no possibility that we could ever achieve it by an exertion of our own efforts."<sup>198</sup> Whatever intellectual goodness we do have is a gracious gift of God.

John Frame provides a helpful critique of the terminology of general and special revelation and suggests a rethinking of the traditional distinction between general and special revelation. The distinction between general and special revelation has always been unclear; since the terms are not found in Scripture, we should hold them loosely.<sup>199</sup> We should not rigidly refuse to revise our understanding of these extrabiblical theological

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special revelation is restricted to certain people only specific information. C. John Collins, *Science and Faith: Friends or Foes?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2003), 181-82.

<sup>195</sup>Moore, "Natural Revelation," 106-07.

<sup>196</sup>A thorough treatment of general revelation is beyond the scope of this paper. For an introduction to more analysis of general revelation, see Bruce Demarest, *General Revelation: Historical Views and Contemporary Issues* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982).

<sup>197</sup>Martin Luther, quoted in Cobb, *Theology and Popular Culture*, 90. John Calvin, though he robustly held to total depravity, tempered this by acknowledging that common grace (the light of nature) continues to work good in the world, even outside the church.

<sup>198</sup>Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith*, 32.

<sup>199</sup>John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Word of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2010), 330-31. Frame suggests that we distinguish revelation as events, words and persons.



concepts. If they create problems, we should not be embarrassed about redefining them or abandoning them.<sup>200</sup>

However, if we maintain the traditional terminology we should also reconstruct it to include “existential revelation.” Existential revelation is “God’s revelation in our person [chaps. 43-44], by which we appropriate the other forms of revelation.”<sup>201</sup> Frame is connecting this idea specifically with the life of Christ (as he appropriated God’s Word in his own life) and the lives of the apostles. Inasmuch as Christ appropriated God’s Word in his life (which he did perfectly and fully), he was an existential revelation of God. Inasmuch as the apostles appropriated God’s Word in their lives, they were an existential revelation of God. This revelation is certainly a lesser and derivative sense, but the apostles did “place great weight on themselves as person-revelation.”<sup>202</sup> They wanted to visit the churches personally, rather than vicariously through their letters (2 John 12) so that their joy might be complete.<sup>203</sup> Paul called the Corinthians to “be imitators of me, as I am of Christ” (1 Cor 11:1; cf. 4:16; Phil 3:17; 4:9; 1 Thess 1:6; 2 Thess 3:9).<sup>204</sup> To a lesser degree than Jesus and the Apostles, though, we can say that the same is true of those who are unregenerate. Though they do not possess special revelation, even the unregenerate possess general revelation. In a sense, culture is the reconfiguring of revelation.<sup>205</sup> This lowest common level of revelation evidences itself in the theological text of cultural production, and leads us to appropriate culture as existential revelation.<sup>206</sup>

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<sup>200</sup>Ibid., 331.

<sup>201</sup>Ibid.

<sup>202</sup>Ibid., 318.

<sup>203</sup>Ibid.

<sup>204</sup>Ibid.

<sup>205</sup>Turnau, *Popologetics*, 58 n. 30.

<sup>206</sup>Van Til argued, “Man’s own psychological activity is no less revelational than the laws of physics about him. All created reality is inherently revelational of the nature and will of God. . . . Thoughts

Where do we see evidence of God’s bestowal of intellectual goodness upon man? Certainly we see evidence of this in his restraint of our lunacy and debasement; whereas Satan is the father of lies, God has not given unbelievers over to complete irrationality and radical falsehood.<sup>207</sup> Indeed, Jesus enlightens every man (John 1:9).<sup>208</sup> Even Neco—king of Egypt, and presumably unregenerate—spoke on behalf of God (2 Chron 35:20-27). Calvin speaks of this enlightenment as “a universal apprehension of reason and understanding [that] is by nature implanted in men,” which, “because it is bestowed indiscriminately upon pious and impious . . . is rightly counted among natural gifts.”<sup>209</sup> This bestowal is a “peculiar grace of God.”<sup>210</sup> “All science and technology carried out by non-Christians is a result of common grace.”<sup>211</sup> Unbelieving thinkers can offer competent and apt statements about reality on occasion. The Lord gave them a slight taste of his divinity so that they would not hide their impiety under a cloak of ignorance.<sup>212</sup> Human reason can know something of how to frame our life according to the rule of his law.<sup>213</sup>

Several additional examples in Scripture indicate that many who were unregenerate still got some things right. Solomon was compared to the pagans of his day

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and deeds of utmost perversity are themselves revelational, revelational, that is, in their very abnormality.” Van Til, “Nature and Scripture,” 266-67.

<sup>207</sup>Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 659.

<sup>208</sup>This is not a saving enlightenment, but a general revelation type of enlightening that enables every person to perceive true things about God and reality. See Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 94-95; and Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 659.

<sup>209</sup>Calvin, *Institutes* 2.2.14.

<sup>210</sup>Ibid., 2.2.15, 273-55.

<sup>211</sup>Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 659.

<sup>212</sup>Calvin, *Institutes* 2.2.18.

<sup>213</sup>Ibid. Calvin notes that though the unregenerate are “blinder than moles” regarding their knowledge of God and his fatherly favor in our behalf, these philosophers occasionally speak “competent and apt statements about God here and there,” though they “always show a certain giddy imagination.”

in a positive way, though he was much wiser (1 Kgs 4:29-34). His worldview was not compared to the pagans' worldview as if his were entirely true and theirs entirely false. The comparison was one of degree that acknowledged the positive truth-value of each but finally emphasized the superiority of Solomon's. In preparing to build the temple, Solomon acknowledged the superiority of the knowledge and skill of the Sidonians to cut timber (1 Kgs 5:6). That the Sidonians had spent significant time studying and mastering the lumberjack profession is a testimony to God's grace that enabled them to continue subduing creation, in spite of the Fall. The Jewish tradition also recognized that God's grace was present in pagans; they rightly viewed the pagan education and wisdom with which Moses interacted in a positive manner (Acts 7:22).<sup>214</sup>

Grace that commonly rests on all leads us to acknowledge that even pagans are correct about some things, even though they are not personally professing God. Berkhof noted that common grace operates by the means of public opinion.<sup>215</sup> Schaeffer further suggests that we can approve the contribution of the unregenerate who creates culture on the basis of the Christian consensus by which he has been influenced.<sup>216</sup> In other words, general revelation (especially when re-enforced by the influence of God's special revelation) "results in the forming of a public opinion that is in external conformity with the law of God."<sup>217</sup> This tacit conformity has been noted in heathen religions,<sup>218</sup> as well as culture in recent history. For example, Karl Barth recognized that though Mozart did

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<sup>214</sup>Dennis Johnson, "Spiritual Antithesis, Common Grace, and Practical Theology," *Westminster Theological Journal* 63 (2002): 12.

<sup>215</sup>Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 441.

<sup>216</sup>Francis Schaeffer, *Art and the Bible*, InterVarsity Press Classics (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006), 68. He points to Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin as examples of non-Christians who borrowed capital from the Christian consensus of Samuel Rutherford's *Lex Rex*.

<sup>217</sup>He also adds, "If it is not controlled by conscience, acting in harmony with the light of nature, or by the Word of God, it becomes a mighty influence for evil." Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 441.

<sup>218</sup>"Heathen religions today still carry remnants of the knowledge of paradise, the fall, the flood, and even of the judgment to come." Masselink, *General Revelation and Common Grace*, 70.

not “seem to have been a particularly active Christian,” he made a significant theological contribution.<sup>219</sup> Martyn Lloyd-Jones also connects God’s work to culture, emphasizing that Shakespeare’s and Michelangelo’s works were the result of the operation of God through common grace.<sup>220</sup> Calvin asks, should we deny that the truth shone upon the equitable ancient jurists, the competent philosophers, eloquent rhetoricians, and the skillful doctors?<sup>221</sup> “Let us be ashamed of such ingratitude, into which not even the pagan poets fell. . . . Those men whom Scripture calls ‘natural men’ were, indeed, sharp and penetrating in their investigation of inferior things.”<sup>222</sup>

Neither Calvin’s assertion nor this dissertation is a masked attempt to praise mankind for his goodness; they both simply present another reason why God should be praised.<sup>223</sup> Calvin wrote that man could not do any good works except for the grace of God.<sup>224</sup> Thus, “Wherever culture has developed something worthwhile, whether in Greece, Rome, or among unbelievers anywhere, it is the fruit of what God did among these peoples, contrary to their sinful natures.”<sup>225</sup> The good work of political order is

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<sup>219</sup>Robert K. Johnston, *Reel Spirituality: Theology and Film in Dialogue* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 90-91. “Works which have drawn upon the truth and which have presented it to us in concentrated and vibrant form seize us, attract us to themselves powerfully, and no one ever—even centuries later—will step forth to deny them” (ibid.).

<sup>220</sup>Lloyd-Jones, *Great Doctrines of the Bible*, 2:25.

<sup>221</sup>Calvin, *Institutes* 2.2.15.

<sup>222</sup>Ibid.

<sup>223</sup>“The very real accomplishments of unbelievers are not their own and cannot be accounted for apart from the grace of God.” Greg L. Bahnsen, *Van Til’s Apologetic: Readings and Analysis* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1998), 426. The Pelagian and Roman Catholic attribute the knowledge of man to his natural capacity that is inherent; but the Calvinist sees that wherever culture is brought to a higher level in which truth is spoken concerning God, this is a working of God’s Holy Spirit. Meeter and Marshall, *Basic Ideas of Calvinism*, 56.

<sup>224</sup>Ibid., 307-08. Calvin, *Institutes* 2.3.12. Along with Augustine, Calvin recognizes no independent activity of the human will, but makes it wholly dependent on grace.

<sup>225</sup>Meeter and Marshall, *Basic Ideas of Calvinism*, 66.

often found in satisfactory forms because of the God's overruling power.<sup>226</sup> In human culture, good exists because it is enabled so by God.<sup>227</sup> In other words, recognizing that all culture contains good requires that we view the gifts in unregenerate human beings as gifts from God.<sup>228</sup> Every worthy value in any culture is from above (Jas 1:17). We can take seriously the insights of various disciplines. No knowledge is in fact secular, gained apart from God or wholly detached from God. God's work enables "people to receive truths universally revealed or available so that all truth is ultimately God's truth."<sup>229</sup>

Christians may learn much from culture written by unbelievers, "even though we do not share their ultimate commitment. . . . We may therefore enjoy the cultural products of non-Christians in such a way as to glorify God through them—even though such praise of God was not part of the conscious intent of these artists."<sup>230</sup> Therefore, as Grudem says, "we must be careful not to reject the good things that unbelievers do as totally evil."<sup>231</sup> Every grain of truth and every glimmer of God's presence should be recognized and accepted by the believer. Though we may begin with a physical response to the piece of culture we encounter, admiring its beauty, symmetry, or impact, culture has the capacity to stir our hearts to great thankfulness to God.<sup>232</sup> Undeserving sinners

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<sup>226</sup>Calvin, *Institutes* 2.2.12-17.

<sup>227</sup>"In people like Plato and Aristotle, Kant and Darwin, stars of the first order have shined, geniuses of the highest caliber, people who expressed very profound ideas, even though they were not professing Christians. They did not have this genius from themselves, but received their talent from God who created them and equipped them for their intellectual labor." Abraham Kuyper, *Wisdom and Wonder: Common Grace in Sciences & Art*, trans. Nelson D. Kloosterman (Grand Rapids: Christian's Library, 2011), 53-54.

<sup>228</sup>Hoekema, *Created in God's Image*, 200.

<sup>229</sup>Gordon R. Lewis and William Demarest, *Integrative Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 3:48. Also see Titus 1:12-13.

<sup>230</sup>Hoekema, *Created in God's Image*, 200.

<sup>231</sup>Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 665.

<sup>232</sup>*Ibid.*

have received from the hand of God a treasure of the wisdom of God, and though their intention may not be to glorify God, it has this effect.

This discussion of common grace's impact on culture as it is under the curse helps the Christian to understand why he can celebrate the culture of those who do not know Christ even as he acknowledges their blindness to how this revelation has been impacted by the Fall and then redemption in Christ.<sup>233</sup> The Christian's task is not to rest on either horn of the dilemma. On the one hand, he should not deny the good of culture; but on the other hand, he should not diminish the depravity of man. As Bahnsen summarized, "Your pagan next-door neighbor, Mr. Smith, is not only a rebel against God, but also a creature of God, made as His image, inescapably in possession of a knowledge of Him, and restrained in his rebellion by the common grace of the Holy Spirit. So you find in him intellectual traits and personal conduct that are not altogether consistent with unbelief or unregeneracy; a full psychological profile of him would be an impure and sometimes baffling mixture."<sup>234</sup> In agreement with the Lausanne Covenant, the co-existence of common grace receiving image-bearers and sin leads the Christian to believe that "because man is God's creature, some of his culture is rich in beauty and goodness. Because he is fallen, all of it is tainted with sin and some of it is demonic."<sup>235</sup> Truly Christian culture most closely resembles culture as God created it, but the Christian may still incorporate fragments from the outside.<sup>236</sup>

In summary, God bestows favor on all by restraining evil and enabling goodness. God's work of common grace in restraining evil and enabling good undergirds

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<sup>233</sup>Moore, "Natural Revelation," 116.

<sup>234</sup>Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic*, 411.

<sup>235</sup>"The Lausanne Covenant," <http://www.lausanne.org/covenant> (accessed November 29, 2009).

<sup>236</sup>Masselink, *General Revelation and Common Grace*, 200.

the contention that even pagan culture retains epistemological value and contributes to the theological task.

This examination of culture in theological perspective has concluded that God purposed cultural production to function as a text that images and worships God. Though it currently bears the effects of sin, cultural production will one day be restored through the redemptive work of Christ and function as it was originally purposed: as a staging of truth that worships God and enriches theological reflection by imaging God. Despite the Fall, the value of cultural production as the imaging and worship of God is not completely eliminated. Because God graciously restrains sinners from utter debasement and enables his image-bearers to continue crafting theologically laden culture, cultural texts retain truth-value.

### **Culture in Anthropological Perspective**

How does this biblical-theological rendering of culture congeal with culture as defined by cultural anthropologists? Though cultural anthropologists' lack of consensus threatens to overshadow their common ground, their conclusions merit consideration and help to form a full-orbed understanding of culture. The function of theological expression is certainly central to rightly understanding culture, but in the full scope of human experience it is much more complex.<sup>237</sup> Anthropologists agree that culture is the meaningful worldview expression of human beings; its function is represented by several illustrative metaphors. This section will explain and defend this contention.

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<sup>237</sup>When relating the gospel to culture in the context of New Testament thought, I. Howard Marshall defined culture as "the particular ways in which man learns to control his environment, to develop intellectual and aesthetic values and expressions of them, and to produce an ideology which expresses and upholds these values. Culture is a social phenomenon, and can have various, separable parts. Culture means a way of thinking, an approach to life in the world, which opens up possibilities for those who hold to it, and at the same time may impose limits on their understanding and ability." I. Howard Marshall, "Culture and the New Testament," in *Gospel and Culture*, ed. John Stott and Robert T. Coote (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1979), 26-27. In the same collection of papers relating the gospel to culture, Charles R. Taber examined the relationships between hermeneutics and culture, noting that culture is learned, shared, selective, integrative and adaptive and adaptable. Charles R. Taber, "Hermeneutics and Culture," in *Gospel and Culture* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1979), 117-18.

## Culture Defined

Anthropologists admit the complexity of defining culture, but essentially agree that culture is meaningful human activity. Thus, as some have pointed out, culture is not an artifact or a thing<sup>238</sup> as much as it is a living worldview, an expression of belief. It involves artifacts, but cannot be reduced to them. Clifford Geertz said that culture “denotes an historically transmitted *pattern of meanings* embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which [people] communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life.”<sup>239</sup> His definition underscores a common theme; though different cultures say different things, they all say something meaningful.

Some critics point to this meaning dimension as a network of presuppositions that help members of society understand the world and their behavior in it. In one definition, for example, culture involves the “presupposed, taken-for-granted models of the world that are widely shared (although not necessarily to the exclusion of other, alternative models) by the members of a society and that play an enormous role in their understanding of that world and their behavior in it.”<sup>240</sup> In this approach, culture is the framework from which meaningful sharing and shaping of life takes place.

Geertz further describes culture as comprising the “webs of significance” that people spin and in which they themselves are suspended.<sup>241</sup> In this understanding, culture both reflects and refracts belief. It gives the world a mirror to see human hearts and it gives the human heart an audience of the world. Cohen attributes responsibility to Geertz

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<sup>238</sup>Roy G. D’Andrade, *The Development of Cognitive Anthropology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 250.

<sup>239</sup>Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic, 1973), 89, emphasis added.

<sup>240</sup>Naomi Quinn and Dorothy Holland, “Culture and Cognition,” in *Cultural Models in Language and Thought*, ed. Dorothy Holland and Naomi Quinn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 4.

<sup>241</sup>Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 5.



for “shifting the anthropological view of culture from its supposedly objective manifestations in social structures, towards its subjective realization by members who compose those structures.”<sup>242</sup>

Geertz was “seminal in leading anthropologists to regard culture as more a matter of thinking than of doing.”<sup>243</sup> This shift highlights the meaning dimension of culture as its very core.<sup>244</sup> A people’s deepest longings, strongest fears, and most dearly held values are revealed in culture. In anthropological perspective then, the general consensus is that culture can be broadly understood as “the meaning dimension of social life.”<sup>245</sup>

Culture is ultimately a “performance” of one’s worldview, namely, his beliefs and convictions; it is an expression of an individual and his understanding of life. A people’s deepest longings, strongest fears, and most dearly held values are revealed in culture. Vanhoozer identifies this worldview performance rendering of culture. “A culture is the objectification, the expression in words and works, of the “spirit” of a particular people who inhabit a particular time and place.”<sup>246</sup> Another way of explaining culture is to say that it is a “‘performance’ of one’s ultimate beliefs and values, a concrete

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<sup>242</sup>Cohen, *Self Consciousness*, 135.

<sup>243</sup>Ibid.

<sup>244</sup>In agreement with anthropologists, producers of popular culture argue for this inextricable meaning dimension of culture. Some are expressly aware of culture’s significance and meaning: culture is a “performance” of one’s worldview, namely, his beliefs and convictions; it is an expression of an individual and his understanding of life. Filmmaker Lawrence Kasdan said, “The thing about writing and directing a film is that you are presenting a view of the universe. Each time, every scene, every line. Every time you put the camera down you are saying here’s a version of the universe as I perceive it. And that is being tested by everyone who sees that movie,” quoted in Romanowski, *Eyes Wide Open*, 57.

<sup>245</sup>Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 31.

<sup>246</sup>Vanhoozer, *First Theology*, 313.

way of ‘staging’ one’s religion. Individuals are the actors, but they are culturally and historically conditioned.”<sup>247</sup>

Culture differs from “society” most simply in its personal nature. Society refers more closely to the institutional forms of government and organization that constitute the context of a people group. It specifically focuses on the connection between the lives of individuals and the systems that form the context for living.<sup>248</sup> Simply put, society is the structure for life whereas culture is the way of life.

Consider an illustration in nature that clarifies a further point. Whereas human culture is propelled by free exercise, nature is propelled by the laws of nature. Understood in this way, the definition of culture does not include the honeycomb of a bees’ nest as an objectification or expression of the “spirit” of a colony of bees, or the work of constructing a honeycomb as the “meaning dimension of bees’ social life.” As Herman Dooyeweerd says, “Cultural activity always consists in giving form to material in free control over the material.”<sup>249</sup> This freedom component of culture is fundamental to why architecture connotes meaning, but the honeycomb—though admirable—simply serves a functional purpose. Another way to phrase this important distinction is to say that culture cannot be reduced merely to function. Culture’s meaning extends beyond what it does, and includes meaningfulness that is fundamentally connected to its originating source: human beings.<sup>250</sup>

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<sup>247</sup>Ibid., 310.

<sup>248</sup>David Newman, *Sociology: Exploring the Architecture of Everyday Life*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge, 2002), xxvi.

<sup>249</sup>Herman Dooyeweerd, *Roots of Western Culture: Pagan, Secular and Christian Options* (Toronto: Wedge, 1979), 64.

<sup>250</sup>As examined above, that humans are created in God’s image and are meaningful with transcendent value undergirds the parallel transcendent value dimension to human culture. Ultimately, a philosophical naturalist is unable to account for the meaning dimension in human culture by pointing to mankind’s “freedom.” Upon what is mankind’s freedom based and on whose authority is it defined? In a purely philosophical naturalistic framework the notion of freedom is reduced to nothing more than biology. C. S. Lewis argued a similar point when he pointed out that value judgments are not intentionally portrayed

Humans capture their expression of belief in cultural forms; this free (as opposed to causal) expression demands not merely explanation but interpretation. Nature demands explanation, whereas culture necessitates interpretation. When considering the performance of worldview in culture, then, we understand this to be a meaningful expression that is both interpretable and understandable.

At first glance, the complexity of culture as the personal expression of free individuals can appear to be overwhelming. Just as words in a sentence only carry meaning when understood in the context of a sentence and paragraph in which they are used, cultural phenomena make sense only when understood in the context of the whole. Thus, each part of culture contributes to the whole; even the smallest elements of personal expression provide essential insight into a more full understanding of the culture. The goal of cultural interpreters, as will be examined below, is to “read bits of culture that communicate not only explicit messages but implicit moods—basic orientations to life, or one’s sense of one’s being-in-the-world.”<sup>251</sup> They are trying to read symbolic action—action that signifies or means something.<sup>252</sup> Culture is the result of humans producing significance from the raw material of nature; these products are *cultural texts* because texts are intentional human actions that call for careful interpretation.<sup>253</sup>

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as unimportant by the subjectivist. However unwilling the subjectivist, his “words are that we ‘*appear* to be saying something very important’ when in reality we are ‘*only* saying something about our own feelings.’” The subjectivist forfeits the transcendent ground of truth upon which he stands to make the claim that feelings have any meaning at all. This type of teaching may be unintentionally purveyed; or, as Lewis has suggested, perhaps “the ‘trousered ape’ and the ‘urban blockhead’ may be precisely the kind of man they [the teachers] really wish to produce.” Whichever of these intentions is true, Lewis argued further that the reason anyone can make aesthetic judgments at all is that the natural order is hard-wired with an absolute sense in which one thing is indeed more “just” or “appropriate” to receiving aesthetic compliments than the other. Only a transcendent God can adequately ground this reality. C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York: Macmillan, 1955), 16, 22, 25-26.

<sup>251</sup>Ibid., 24.

<sup>252</sup>Geertz, *Interpretations of Cultures*, 10.

<sup>253</sup>Vanhoozer, *Everyday Theology*, 26.

In summary, anthropologists define culture to be free, shared, and meaningful; particular communities express their worldviews, embodying these values in artifacts that invite response, exchange, and interpretation.

### **Culture as Metaphor**

Some have not stressed the importance of *defining* culture, *per se*, but with understanding it as a metaphor and illustrating its uses.<sup>254</sup> Myers vividly illustrates this challenge of defining culture: the word “culture” is an abstraction; we cannot isolate three pounds or fourteen centimeters of culture.<sup>255</sup> Attempts at defining the word certainly have benefits, but a full-orbed understanding should also consider the concrete experience of culture’s function. Observing its function will help to illustrate its definition.

The origins of the word reflect this very point. “The English word ‘culture’ comes from the German *Kultur*, meaning to develop or grow.”<sup>256</sup> D. Stephen Long notes that culture was once used to describe a process; it is what farmers and gardeners did to nature.<sup>257</sup> The blackberry patch or cornfield was the result of culturing, the process of nurturing nature. Material growing in a petri dish is a “culture.” In this sense, “culture” is a literal process. When applied to people rather than nature, “culture” is being used as a metaphor to describe the cultivation of the human experience. Howell and Paris argue that this “notion of culture as a way of life of a group of people did not emerge until the

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<sup>254</sup>Richard Lints acknowledges the dynamic nature of culture when he writes, “It is easy to think of culture in the abstract, as if it were some entity far removed from the concrete life of ordinary people. However, culture is nothing more than the constant and curious conversation that goes on between every one of us and the environment in which we reside—we ourselves being part of that environment.” Richard Lints, *The Fabric of Theology: A Prolegomenon to Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 104.

<sup>255</sup>Myers, *All God’s Children and Blue Suede Shoes*, 30.

<sup>256</sup>Brian M. Howell and Jenell Williams Paris, *Introducing Cultural Anthropology: A Christian Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 27.

<sup>257</sup>D. Stephen Long, *Theology and Culture: A Guide to the Discussion* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2008), 8.

latter half of the nineteenth century.”<sup>258</sup> As a way of life, “culture is a metaphor for a kind of ‘cultivation’ that occurs to people through their practices, language, communities, doctrines, etc.”<sup>259</sup> Long argues that the meaning of the word culture “is not found in a precise definition, but in the various uses for the term.”<sup>260</sup> This pragmatic approach to understanding culture is helpful because it emphasizes culture’s *impact*.<sup>261</sup> What follows are several metaphors for culture that contribute to its definition by illustrating its revelatory and shaping function.

**Culture as mirror.** As a meaningful expression of human beings, culture functions as a mirror of the human heart. It reflects specific belief, revealing the convictional framework held. Because of the complex nature of the Fall, cultural expression does not clearly and cohesively correlate identically with its crafter’s worldview. As a mirror, even if in a convoluted way, culture reflects the heart of its crafter.

**Culture as lens.** Some refer to culture as the lenses through which we see the world. Not only does culture look differently from the outside in, but culture dramatically changes how we perceive the world.<sup>262</sup> It is a major component of the network of presuppositions inherent in the epistemological framework of every human being. One set of “cultural glasses” contribute to one person seeing a situation or set of facts entirely

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<sup>258</sup>Howell and Paris, *Introducing Cultural Anthropology*, 28.

<sup>259</sup>Long, *Theology and Culture*, 8.

<sup>260</sup>*Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>261</sup>I will not reduce culture to its function because culture’s meaning is not merely located in its function, but as *ding in sich*.

<sup>262</sup>Howell and Paris, *Introducing Cultural Anthropology*, 39. Howell and Paris direct us to see, for example, Paul Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986), 31; Duane Elmer, *Cross-Cultural Conflict: Building Relationships for Effective Ministry* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 12-20.

different than a different set of “cultural glasses.”<sup>263</sup> This metaphor helps us each to see that we are each situated with our own optometric prescription that is uniquely ours; thus, we are epistemologically limited in our view of the world. We live in a culturally pluralistic world; we help along our understanding of other people when we learn to “wear their glasses” or see life from their cultural perspective.<sup>264</sup> Culture not only *reflects* belief as a mirror, but as lens, it refracts belief.

**Culture as world.** In *As You Like It*, Shakespeare likened our lives to a theatrical performace. “All the world’s a stage and all the men and women merely players. They have their exits and their entrances and one man in his time plays many parts.”<sup>265</sup> In this metaphor, culture functions as a stage for life, providing us a platform from which we perform. It is the environment in which we conduct life. A metaphor that similarly illustrates this point is that culture serves as a greenhouse; life’s ideological atmospheric condition is determined by its culture. Culture is not only a reflection of belief but it is also an environment of belief. In other words, the individual not only forms the culture in which he performs, but he is also conditioned by the culture that has been formed around him. In culture, the people are given a particular language that they must speak, scenery in which they must behave, and props with which they must work. Culture is a *world* because it is a meaningful environment in which humans operate.<sup>266</sup> Whether

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<sup>263</sup>Howell and Paris, *Introducing Cultural Anthropology*, 38.

<sup>264</sup>Ibid., 39. This metaphor is limited, however, because it “does not capture well the dynamic interaction between the material world and our views or understandings of the world.” It is also limited because it helps us understand the descriptive power of culture but not its transformative power.

<sup>265</sup>William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, Act 4, Scene 6, Line 11.

<sup>266</sup>Vanhoozer described culture as both “works” and “worlds” of meaning. Vanhoozer, *Everyday Theology*, 26.

we are making conversation, pancakes, or a film, we are making culture while simultaneously living in a culture.<sup>267</sup>

The world of meaning that is created compels mankind to view life from a certain perspective, namely, that spirit of life that is common to culture as a whole. The culture of *The Simpsons*, for example, is not simply a reflection of the producers' beliefs about life, but invites the "textual reader" to immerse himself in their world of meaning, and to embrace it as acceptable and normative.<sup>268</sup> Culture communicates a worldview framework that compels its members to understand life through it. Vanhoozer said, "If we dwell in a text's world long enough it will begin to shape our vision and our values."<sup>269</sup> Oscar Wilde likewise suggested that "art does not imitate life as much as life imitates art."<sup>270</sup> A clearly symbiotic relationship seems to exist between cultural expression and life as it is lived. Though individuals clearly influence culture, culture clearly influences individuals. John Storey stated this idea strongly: "Culture helps constitute the structure and shape the history. In other words, cultural texts, for example, do not simply reflect history, they make history and are part of its processes and practices and should, therefore, be studied for the (ideological) work that they do, rather than for the (ideological) work that they reflect."<sup>271</sup> As a "world," culture shapes.

**Culture as water.** Culture's pervasive, unconscious and intrinsic nature has led some to refer to culture as the water in which we swim. Thus, people are fish in

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<sup>267</sup>Howell and Paris, *Introducing Cultural Anthropology*, 41.

<sup>268</sup>For some reflection on the culture and worldview of *The Simpsons*, see Mark I. Pinsky, *The Gospel According to the Simpsons* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001); *The Simpsons and Philosophy*, ed. William Irwin, Mark Conard, and Aeon Skoble (Peru, IL: Open Court, 2001).

<sup>269</sup>Vanhoozer, *First Theology*, 332.

<sup>270</sup>Oscar Wilde, *The Decay of Lying: An Observation* (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger, 2004), 26.

<sup>271</sup>John Storey, *Cultural Studies and the Study of Popular Culture* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1996), 3.

water, not perceiving the feeling of wetness because of its inextricability from human survival. Culture is that which surrounds us, unwittingly pervading every fiber of our existence. It is as inescapable and unavoidable as the air that we breathe. To define the culture in which we live is to define the situation in which we live. The challenge this reveals is that culture's messages and impact are difficult to detect and withstand because we cannot escape the confines of the fish bowl. We are subjectively situated in that very environment that requires our attentive efforts to reform.<sup>272</sup> As water, culture subtly inoculates.

**Culture as community.** The culture concept as widely understood today is “the total way of life of a group of people that is learned, adaptive, shared, and integrated.”<sup>273</sup> Culture is not determined genetically or biologically, but is learned and adaptive. “Brain studies suggest that our brains take shape, to some degree, in response to our social and physical environment, but at birth every brain is ready to learn any culture.”<sup>274</sup> In other words, culture is determined at least in part relationally as individuals transmit their way of life to another.<sup>275</sup> “Individual culture” is a contradiction in terms because culture is by definition shared.<sup>276</sup> As community, culture congregates.<sup>277</sup>

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<sup>272</sup>Howell and Paris, *Introducing Cultural Anthropology*, 38. The breakdown in the metaphor, as Howell and Paris point out, is that humans can change their culture. Though a fish may not be able to change the chemical composition of water in order to enhance their living conditions and survival ability, humans can respond and adapt to, as well as innovate within their culture, changing the culture itself.

<sup>273</sup>Ibid., 36.

<sup>274</sup>Ibid., 37.

<sup>275</sup>Kline draws this point from the biblical text, noting that the “cultural commission was a family mandate, not alone in the sense that it was to be performed by mankind acting as a family unity but in the further sense that the perfecting of the family itself was the cultural task to be accomplished.” Kline, *Kingdom Prologue*, 71.

<sup>276</sup>Howell and Paris, *Introducing Cultural Anthropology*, 37.

<sup>277</sup>“In contrast to the older assumption that culture is a preexisting social-ordering force that is transmitted externally to members of a cultural group and binds individuals to society, postmodern anthropologists focus on the disjunctures within culture. Roy G. D’Andrade, *The Development of Cognitive*



**Culture as conversation.** Howell and Paris's preferred metaphor is conversation. Conversation is simultaneously shared and dynamic. This metaphor "captures the learned, adaptive, shared, and integrated aspects of the culture concept, while also allowing us to see how it is laden with power relationships and is open to individual creativity."<sup>278</sup> As conversation, culture dynamically shares.

These metaphors illustrate that culture functions as a multi-dimensional human experience of revealing and shaping meaning. Culture reflects, refracts, shapes, inoculates, congregates, and shares. These functions highlight the ideological revealing and shaping power that culture possesses and leads the cultural analyst to consider attentively and skillfully its danger and potential.

### **Conclusion**

In anthropological perspective, then, culture is a free, meaningful, communal activity of human beings. Particular communities express their worldview, embodying their values in texts that invite response, exchange and interpretation. The ideological power that culture wields necessitates careful attention and strategic employment.

In theological perspective, culture is the image-bearing crafting of theologically significant expressions that by nature worship and witness. God intended for culture to be directed in worship to him and shared in community as a means of theological enrichment. However, fallen mankind co-opts culture for self-glorifying idolatry and degradation of life, rather than employing culture for God's glory and human flourishing. In his grace, God negatively restrains sin and his wrath on sinners so that

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*Anthropology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 250. Hence, although cultures are wholes, these wholes are not monolithic but internally fissured. Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 56. Culture is "that which aggregates people and processes, rather than integrates them," according to Anthony Cohen. Anthony P. Cohen, *Self Consciousness: An Alternative Anthropology of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1994), 118-19. Further, postmodern anthropologists speak of culture as the outcome and product of social interaction. A society is an aggregate of people engaged in an ongoing struggle to determine the meaning of public symbols and thereby to build a consensus. Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 56.

<sup>278</sup>Howell and Paris, *Introducing Cultural Anthropology*, 41.

they continue to craft culture in a way that is not as idolatrous or truth distorting as it could be. Furthermore, God positively empowers his image-bearers to produce cultural texts that retain epistemological value. These cultural texts advance a convoluted mixture of idolatry and grace; this existential revelation serves the Christian community well when properly appropriated.<sup>279</sup>

Culture's theological significance and worldview revealing and shaping power have serious implications, particularly for the Christian. Cultural texts carry powerful influence and must be treated with utmost vigilance. Vanhoozer surveyed a host of secular theories on culture and concluded similarly to our brief survey, namely, that popular culture exercises an "ideological function: using meaning to serve the interests of the powerful."<sup>280</sup> He warns that the ideological concerns often lurking behind cultural texts *should* occasion our suspicion.<sup>281</sup> "Christians have nothing to gain from naïve or superficial interpretations of popular culture that see only bright possibilities for new forms of spirituality and theological engagement and not the potential for new forms of idolatry as well."<sup>282</sup> Cultural texts that reflect fallenness require discerning interpretation, the ability to separate truth from error. Vanhoozer's warning serves the Christian well: whatever appropriation in the theological task culture receives, it must be done with great attention to its ideological impact, whether for good or ill. At the least, a hermeneutic of caution that acknowledges the pervasiveness of fallenness seems appropriate. Simultaneously, a hermeneutic of caution will keep us ready to encounter God's excellent gifts, even in the culture of fallen people.

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<sup>279</sup>The proper appropriation of culture is taken up in chap. 4.

<sup>280</sup>Vanhoozer, *Everyday Theology*, 39.

<sup>281</sup>Ibid.

<sup>282</sup>Ibid.

## CHAPTER 4

### THE APPROPRIATION OF CULTURE

#### **Introduction**

The previous chapter of this dissertation argued that culture serves as existential revelation that reflects a mixture of grace and idolatry; thus, culture makes a positive contribution to the theological task. Though arguing for the positive contribution of culture to the theological task is this dissertation's primary objective, more consideration must be given to the epistemological antithesis between culture and Scripture. This chapter qualifies the antithesis, locates the contribution of culture as ancillary, and argues for a hermeneutical flow in the theological task that prioritizes Scripture.

#### **The Antithesis Qualified**

The Bible's description of the strained relationship between the Christian and the world has been summarized in the idea of antithesis. For example, Philippians 2:14-15 calls the Christian to shine like stars in the midst of a perverse generation, exhibiting a fundamental difference between their behavior and that of the world. Romans 12:2 exhorts the Christian to be different by being renewed in his mind, not to be conformed to the spirit of the age. Frame comments further on the epistemological antithesis, "Scripture draws an antithesis between the wisdom of God, of which the fear of the Lord is the beginning (Ps 111:10; Prov 1:7), and the wisdom of the world (1 Cor 1:18-2:15; 3:18-23). In terms of this antithesis, unbelievers have no true knowledge. But Scripture

attributes knowledge to them in lesser senses.”<sup>1</sup> Jeremiah’s rendering of pagan culture typifies Scripture’s warnings:

Thus says the LORD: “Learn not the way of the nations, nor be dismayed at the signs of the heavens because the nations are dismayed at them, for the customs of the peoples are vanity. A tree from the forest is cut down and worked with an axe by the hands of a craftsman. They decorate it with silver and gold; they fasten it with hammer and nails so that it cannot move. Their idols are like scarecrows in a cucumber field, and they cannot speak; they have to be carried, for they cannot walk. Do not be afraid of them, for they cannot do evil, neither is it in them to do good.” (Jer 10:2-5)

The list of Scripture’s warning concerning the antithesis could continue, but the general point is clear. Christians and post-Fall pagan culture are not in harmony with one another.<sup>2</sup> One must account for this antithesis in a model of theology employing culture.

Many have stressed the importance of antithesis, noting its dramatic impact.<sup>3</sup> The antithesis leads many theologians toward extreme positions that either completely eradicate commonality or tightly merge theology and culture, as chapter 2 illustrated.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>John Frame, *The Doctrine of God: A Theology of Lordship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2002), 435.

<sup>2</sup>Cultural utopianism is certainly a temptation worth acknowledging. Even while some utopian endeavors temporarily flourish, these earthly hopes overshadow the hope of heaven and may even lead some to expect heaven on earth. Few have expressed the deceitfulness of such an approach better than C. S. Lewis. “When they want to convince you that earth is your home, notice how they go about it. They begin by trying to persuade you that earth can be made into heaven, thus giving a sop to your sense of exile on earth as it is. Next, they tell you that this fortunate event is still a good way off in the future, thus giving a sop to your knowledge that the fatherland is not here and now. Finally, lest your longing for the trans-temporal should awake and spoil the whole affair, they use any rhetoric that comes to hand to keep out of your mind the recollection that even if all the happiness they promised could come to man on earth, yet still each generation would lose it by death, including the last generation of all, and the story would lie nothing, not even a story, forever and ever.” C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory* (New York: HarperOne, 2001), 8. Lewis’s reference was specifically directed to secular utopianism but his application is equally relevant to cultural utopianism, for those who may overlook the effects of sin.

<sup>3</sup>Machen raised and answered two common objections to a close union between culture and Christianity. (1) The culture would be destroyed by Christianity. (2) Christianity would be destroyed by the culture. But “dedication of human powers to God is found . . . not to destroy but to heighten them.” J. Gresham Machen, “Christianity and Culture” in *Mars Hill Monographs* (Charlottesville, VA: Mars Hill Audio), 7.

<sup>4</sup>Johnston also embraces this false dilemma: we must either be fully involved or keep our distance. He leaves no room for balance. Robert Johnston, *Reel Spirituality* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 71. Bavinck offered this warning about the tendency toward these extremes. “Thus at the end of our century the divinization and vilification of man and the adoration and denigration of nature are strangely missed

However, chapter 3 demonstrated that though post-Fall culture is corrupted, it still retains value. Thus, these two extreme positions are unnecessary.

In short, the antithesis between the theologian and culture should be preserved, though nuanced carefully. Cornelius Van Til is one of the foremost defenders of antithesis, having devoted a significant amount of attention to it. His language of “absolute antithesis” is sharp; an examination of his idea of antithesis will refine this dissertation’s articulation of antithesis and common grace and the relationship between the two. Van Til’s notion of absolute antithesis is of particular significance because it has led some to embrace the idea that unbelievers know nothing, thus, we can learn nothing from them. Frame notes that Van Til’s extreme antithetical formulations give some aid and comfort to this notion in some circles that Van Til’s thought forbids us to learn anything at all from unbelievers.<sup>5</sup> “Although Van Til affirms the ambiguity of the unbeliever’s position under common grace, he nevertheless often writes as though the unbeliever knows and affirms no truth at all and thus is not at all affected by common grace.”<sup>6</sup> Frame illustrates this by quoting Van Til from several selections, clearly noting the problem that emerges.

The natural man cannot will to do God’s will. He cannot even know what the good is.<sup>7</sup>

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together. All balance has gone awry, the harmony of life is broken.” Herman Bavinck, “Common Grace,” trans. Raymond C. Van Leeuwen, *Calvin Theological Journal* 24 (April 1989): 55. For further discussion on this point, see Ted Turnau, *Popologetics* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2012), 176-79, and of D. A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church: Understanding a Movement and Its Implications* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), chap. 4.

<sup>5</sup>John Frame, *Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2009), 212. Frame does not list any examples of those “disciples” of Van Til that make this claim. Friends of Van Til quickly point out that this rendering of antithesis is a misrepresentation of Van Til’s position.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, 189.

<sup>7</sup>Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, ed. Scott Oliphant, rev. ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008), 54.

It will be quite impossible then to find a common area of knowledge between believers and unbelievers unless there is agreement between them as to the nature of man himself. But there is no such agreement.<sup>8</sup>

But without the light of Christianity it is as little possible for man to have the correct view about himself in the world as it is to have the true view about God on account of the fact of sin man is blind with respect to the truth wherever the truth appears. And truth is one. Man cannot truly know himself unless he truly knows God.<sup>9</sup>

[The unbeliever] interprets all the facts and all the laws that are presented to him in terms of [his unbelieving] assumptions.<sup>10</sup>

It is precisely Christianity as a whole, and therefore each of these doctrines as part of Christianity, that are meaningless to him as long as he is not willing to drop his own assumptions of autonomy and chance.<sup>11</sup>

The “reason” of sinful men will invariably act wrongly. . . . The natural man will invariably employ the tool of his reason to reduce these contents to a naturalistic level.<sup>12</sup>

In these selections, Van Til’s extreme rendering of the antithesis is problematic. He claims that the natural man *invariably* employs his reason to suppress the truth. Van Til leaves no room here for sinful men to ever embrace the idea that a miracle took place or that Jesus is the Son of God. The antithesis is stated so strongly here that it seems to leave no room for the unbeliever to utter a true sentence or even engage in communication with a believer.<sup>13</sup> Additionally, if the unbeliever will be indifferent to any facts set before him, the possibility of Christian witness seems to be eliminated.<sup>14</sup>

Frame points out that Van Til admits of this problem most pointedly in *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, where he does concede that unbelievers have

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 67.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 73.

<sup>10</sup>Van Til, *Defense of the Faith*, 201.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 150.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 83.

<sup>13</sup>Frame, *Cornelius Van Til*, 191.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid.

knowledge that is “true as far as it goes.”<sup>15</sup> He says, “We cannot give any wholly satisfactory account of the situation as it actually obtains. . . . All that we can do with this question as with many other questions in theology, is to hem it in in order to keep out errors, and to say that truth lies within a certain territory.”<sup>16</sup> Whereas at times Van Til advocates a sharp and absolute epistemological antithesis, at other times he seems to advocate commonality in an ambiguous way.

For example, he concedes that the unregenerate person’s epistemological position is one characterized by a mixture of truth and error. Though the unregenerate hate God, they know him in a modified sense and “do good.” “The actual situation is therefore always a mixture of truth with error. Being ‘without God in the world’ the natural man yet knows God, and, in spite of himself, to some extent recognizes God. By virtue of their creation in God’s image, by virtue of the ineradicable sense of deity within them and by virtue of God’s restraining general grace, those who hate God, yet in a restricted sense know God, and do good.”<sup>17</sup> Van Til persists in setting the antithesis in its most extreme form, but Scripture and experience in the world directs him otherwise, thus exposing his intellectual consternation. Of this problem he is well aware; at times this problem leads him to agnosticism.<sup>18</sup> Though at times Van Til advocates absolute antithesis, elsewhere he maintains that there is “relative good in those who are evil in principle.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>Cornelius Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology: Prolegomena and the Doctrines of Revelation, Scripture, and God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2007), 26.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 27.

<sup>18</sup>Frame critiques Van Til for his inconsistency: “My evaluation is that, nevertheless, these formulations [Van Til’s attempts at resolving his inconsistency] are not altogether consistent with one another, and some of them can be rejected on other grounds.” Frame, *Cornelius Van Til*, 192.

<sup>19</sup>Van Til, *Defense of the Faith*, 50.

Frame offers several strategic categories that attempt to balance Van Til's antithesis and reconcile antithesis with common grace, three of which will be examined below.<sup>20</sup>

**Metaphysical vs. epistemological.** The first category of differentiation that Van Til employs is one that posits the metaphysical status of the unregenerate against the epistemological status of the unregenerate. Van Til says that though all men have common notions of God and of things natural, they do not have a common ground of knowledge with the elect. The revelation of God comes to the reprobate through his own nature, and is a psychological phenomenon that is not a part of the reprobate himself, metaphysically speaking. "Common notions may be thought of as nothing more than revelation that comes to man through man."<sup>21</sup> This psychological phenomenon is not constitutive of the person himself. Van Til critic, James Daane writes, "The reprobate's *psychological* possession, acceptance, and employment of these common notions is therefore a part of *the objective-revelational-metaphysical situation*. It is *not* the reprobate."<sup>22</sup>

In other words, Van Til distinguished between the psychological and metaphysical, noting that the psychological possession of truth was not true knowledge that remains and defines the person's ontology, but temporary and accidental, not

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<sup>20</sup>Frame proposes five categories of strategies for reconciling antithesis with common grace. (1) Extreme antithetical formulations; (2) normative formulations; (3) situational formulations; (4) existential formulations; and (5) practical formulations. Frame, *Cornelius Van Til*, 192-210.

<sup>21</sup>Cornelius Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1995), 53.

<sup>22</sup>James Daane, *A Theology of Grace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), 97. With equal disdain for Van Til, Jesse De Boer launched a three-part series of attacks on Van Til, accusing Van Til of "substituting idealism for Christianity." Jesse De Boer, "Professor Van Til's Apologetics, Part 1," *Calvin Forum* 19 (August-September 1953): 12. In his third article De Boer wrote: "I am convinced, not only that Van Til's apologetics is riddled with glaring ambiguities, with bald fallacies, and with misinterpretations of the thought of other men, but also that his writings are capable of damaging the intellectual habits of those who read them." Jesse De Boer, "Professor Van Til's Apologetics, Part 3," *Calvin Forum* 19 (November 1953): 57.



essential.<sup>23</sup> One's interpretation of the facts determines whether those facts remain merely psychological or whether they take root in a person at the metaphysical level, defining that person's identity.<sup>24</sup> "The epistemological in Van Til's thought denotes simply and solely *man's conscious response to the objective-revelational-metaphysical situation*. . . . The reality of the elect and reprobate, the reality which they are as "men as men" is *wholly identical* with their religious *self-consciousness*."<sup>25</sup> Insofar as the unbeliever is reasoning with complete epistemological self-consciousness, he is in complete antithesis with the Christian.

However, non-Christians do not actually operate this way. They are not fully aware of the antithesis. Van Til identifies this inconsistency.

But in the course of history the natural man is not fully self-conscious of his own position. The prodigal cannot altogether stifle his father's voice. There is a conflict of notions within him. But he himself is not fully and self-consciously aware of this conflict within him. He has within him the knowledge of God by virtue of his creation in the image of God. But this idea of God is suppressed by his false principle, the principle of autonomy. This principle of autonomy is, in turn, suppressed by the restraining power of God's common grace. Thus the ideas with which he daily works do not proceed consistently either from the one principle or from the other.<sup>26</sup>

The inconsistency of multiple conflicting beliefs can be traced back to the idea that some truths are held merely psychologically, whereas the belief system and framework is metaphysical, constituting the person himself. True knowledge, in Van Til's understanding, is not held psychologically, but metaphysically.

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<sup>23</sup>Bahnsen describes Van Til's distinction as "intellectual affinity and rapport." "He thinks (psychologically) in a particular way that does not comport (epistemologically) with his argumentation." Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic*, 436.

<sup>24</sup>This distinction between the psychological and epistemological is what led Daane to accuse Van Til of holding basic presuppositions that bear the character of a rational existential dialectic. Daane, *A Theology of Grace*, 99. For a rebuttal to Daane and support of Van Til, see Rousas J. Rushdoony, *By What Standard? An Analysis of the Philosophy of Cornelius Van Til* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1958).

<sup>25</sup>Daane, *A Theology of Grace*, 98.

<sup>26</sup>Van Til, *Defense of the Faith*, 170.

In other words, Van Til separated intellectual knowledge from volitional acceptance. Intellectual knowledge is suppressed knowledge rather than saving knowledge. The unbeliever interprets the facts wrongly and employs them for idolatry; for Van Til, this is not true knowledge because it has been suppressed and rejected. Van Til described it this way: “The question of knowledge is an ethical question at the root. It is indeed possible to have theoretically correct knowledge about God without loving God. The devil illustrates this point. Yet what is meant by knowing God in Scripture is *knowing and loving* God: this is *true* knowledge of God: the other is *false*.”<sup>27</sup> The problem of unbelievers not “possessing knowledge” is moral, not intellectual.<sup>28</sup> The problem is not with the facts, but what one does with the facts.

However, this rendering demands that truth be experienced and applied in order for the truth to be truly true. Despite Van Til’s rigorous attempts to demonstrate otherwise, truth is not contingent on the acceptance or rejection by individuals. Truth possesses its own validity apart from the acceptance or rejection by any individual. Van Til’s separation between psychological possession of a truth and metaphysical application of the truth could be a helpful *distinction*, if it were merely a distinction; but his divorce of the psychological from the metaphysical unnecessarily bifurcates the nature of truth, making its truthfulness contingent on volitional acceptance. In other words, one can helpfully *distinguish* between psychological knowledge (*notitia*) and metaphysical knowledge (*assensus* and *fiducia*), but one must not separate the two as if one were a true type of truth and the other were a false type of truth.

**Form vs. content.** A second distinction that Van Til employs in describing the antithesis is between the form and content of speech, noting, “general objectivity is

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<sup>27</sup>Ibid., 17.

<sup>28</sup>Knowledge is not merely exposure to revelation, capacity to know revelation or speaking with formal correctness about revelation. Frame suggests that the apologist should avoid this sort of rendering that reduces knowledge to mere exposure, capacity or formality. Frame, *Cornelius Van Til*, 197.

common to Christians and non-Christians in a formal sense only.”<sup>29</sup> The formal sense in which persons speak is to be distinguished from the actual content of their speech; in the same way that a parrot can repeat words that speak of knowledge of God, the unbeliever can repeat words of their knowledge of things, though they do not mean the same thing that a believer intends. Thus, a Christian and non-Christian can have no true agreement, since they differ over the meaning of every word; in this understanding they “speak entirely different languages.”<sup>30</sup>

This distinction between form and content contributes to this conversation regarding the antithesis because it acknowledges the role that the author holds as the determiner of meaning; but ultimately this distinction does not adequately account for the actual occasional commonality in content between non-Christians and Christians that the Scripture concedes. Jesus commends the words of the Pharisees in Matthew 23:2-3. Paul commends the words of the pagans in Acts 17:28 and Titus 1:12-13. The Bible’s endorsement of select pagan communication does not complement Van Til’s rendering of absolute antithesis between form and content. Van Til himself seems to agree that his position is problematic when he admits that man begins his course in the image of God, which consists not merely of the capacity for knowing God, but of *actual* knowledge content.<sup>31</sup> Though pagans and Christians do import different meaning into the same word more often than not, this difference in content does not characterize absolutely every statement. Actual instances exist in which the content of pagan communication is true, providing common ground between the pagan and Christian. This distinction between form and content is a helpful point of discussion, but does not justify an absolute antithesis.

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<sup>29</sup>Van Til, *Defense of the Faith*, 59.

<sup>30</sup>Frame, *Cornelius Van Til*, 196.

<sup>31</sup>Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 173.

**Worldview orientation.** A third category for reconciling Van Til's antithesis isolates the pagan's *system of thought* as that which is in antithesis with the Christian's system of thought. This suggestion opens the door for situational common ground, though the antithesis of life-system orientation remains.<sup>32</sup> "The unbeliever is the man with yellow glasses on his face. He sees himself and his world through these glasses. He cannot remove them. His *interpretation* of himself and of every fact in the universe relating to himself is, unavoidably, a *false* interpretation."<sup>33</sup> In other words, though his interpretation of facts, particularly their place in his worldview, is false, he may be correct regarding particular points of fact. The pagan's false worldview does not negate the point of truth, though it leads him to distort truth into wrong conclusions and implications of those conclusions.

Van Til's point that a false worldview orientation undergirds the ultimately unsatisfactory quality of a pagan work of culture is similar to John Barber's conclusion on this matter.

Unregenerate men cannot circumvent the fact that their cultural production comes from a spiritual shortfall. Non-Christian artists may produce enduring works of art, yet the spiritual deficit from which they work hinders their ability to produce the best possible art. Does this mean that only Christians are capable of great art? For example, Pablo Picasso was not a believer, yet he is considered one of the greatest painters of all time. Undoubtedly, Picasso demonstrated technical brilliance and aesthetic vision in his compositions. But what is important to remember is that these artists worked from a spiritual *deficit*. While from a human perspective, his life-production may be considered 'great,' sin had reduced them to mere vestiges of the image of God, meaning that his work never reached its *full* potential. In a *spiritual* sense, his work is *not* sound.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup>Van Til helpfully spoke of antithesis in this way. "It should be remembered that the universe has actually been created by God and is actually sustained by his providence. This precludes the possibility of any non-Christian philosopher, however profound, offering a system of interpretation of the universe that would seem satisfactory even to himself." Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 75.

<sup>33</sup>Cornelius Van Til, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1969), 258-59.

<sup>34</sup>John Barber, *The Road From Eden: Studies in Christianity and Culture* (Palo Alto, CA: Academica, 2008), 452.

Klaas Schilder states this idea a bit more strongly. “Our conclusion then is that culture is never more than a mere attempt and that, since it is restricted to remnants only, it is a matter of tragedy. God has indeed left something behind in fallen man. But these are only ‘small remnants’ of his original gifts...they can never produce any work that is sound.”<sup>35</sup> Both Barber and Schilder would agree that as long as the *imago Dei* remains defaced, mankind cannot fulfill the cultural mandate in the way it was intended, as a human action that brings glory to God.<sup>36</sup> This impossibility stems from the defaced image, which entails a false worldview orientation of the unregenerate.

Of these three categories of distinction, this third seems to be the most helpful. When a pagan identifies the grass to be the color green, he is correct. When he fails to locate the greenness as an expression of God’s creativity and fails to appropriate the diverse coloring of the world for God’s glory, he is incorrect. His interpretation of the color of the grass is correct on a factual level, but false on an ultimate level. Kuyper articulates the antithesis similarly. “Sin’s darkening lies in this, that we lost the gift of grasping the true context, the proper coherence, the systematic integration of all things. Now we view everything only externally, not in its core and essence, each thing individually but not in their mutual connection and in their origin from God.”<sup>37</sup> In this

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<sup>35</sup>Klaas Schilder, *Christ and Culture*, trans. G. van Rongen and W. Helder, (St Petersburg, FL: Premier, 1977), 7. The book can be read in its entirety online at [http://www.reformed.org/webfiles/cc/christ\\_and\\_culture.html](http://www.reformed.org/webfiles/cc/christ_and_culture.html) (accessed February 1, 2013).

<sup>36</sup>Barber also notes, “However, intrinsic to the notion of common grace is that man, even in a fallen state, is sufficiently able to perform his cultural responsibilities without need of regeneration.” Barber, *Road from Eden*, 452. This idea that the defacement of the image impairs the proper fulfillment of the cultural mandate corresponds to the argument set forth in chap. 3, that cultural renewal correlates with *imago Dei* renewal.

<sup>37</sup>Abraham Kuyper, *Wisdom and Wonder: Common Grace in Sciences & Art*, trans. Nelson D. Kloosterman (Grand Rapids: Christian’s Library, 2011), 55. Kuyper compares the unregenerate person’s understanding of the world to that of a dog or a bird, which sees a palace of stones, wood and mortar, and perhaps color, but comprehends nothing of that building’s architecture or style, the purpose of its rooms or windows. He distinguishes between *correct* knowledge of the unregenerate and the *true* knowledge of the regenerate. Ibid. 55-56. Vincent E. Bacote notes that Kuyper heavily stressed the importance of Christian identity; “he did not wish for Christians to sacrifice their faith when they participated in the various areas of the public realm.” Vincent E. Bacote, introduction to *Wisdom and Wonder, Common Grace in Sciences &*

sense, God restrains the pagan's distortion from being as bad as it could be, but does not reorient the pagan's heart to embrace the transcendent significance of the truth that fulfills its purpose by bringing glory to God.

Another way to say this is that the epistemological continuity between unregenerate and regenerate is not of worldview orientation: the grand metanarrative (story), its interrelationship with each identifiable part (system) or presuppositions (starting point).<sup>38</sup> Here at the level of worldview the antithesis is indeed most extreme. The epistemological common ground between Christian and non-Christian is not one of worldview orientation, but between the sharing of bits of truth that are held in conflict and in opposition to one another.<sup>39</sup>

This continuity of bits of truth does not suggest or imply neutral territory. As Greg Bahnsen states, "Common grace does not dilute the apologetical challenge."<sup>40</sup> Quite the opposite, this highlights the discombobulated nature of the unregenerate person's worldview, as Romans 1 explains. Thus, truth serves as a distraction to the course of the pagan's life. In his autonomous system of thought he is confused and truth distorted. He is inconsistent with his worldview. When he does encounter truth, his inclination will be to distort, manipulate, avoid or disregard it. The knowledge should lead the sinner to fall

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*Art*, by Abraham Kuyper, trans. Nelson D. Kloosterman (Grand Rapids: Christian's Library, 2011), 25.

<sup>38</sup>See J. Mark Bertrand, *Rethinking Worldview: Learning to Think, Live, and Speak in This World* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007). Bertrand introduced me to this tripartite framework of worldview as starting point, system, and story.

<sup>39</sup>"Because of their different assumptions, even the 'facts' that believers and unbelievers agree upon (in a vague or formal way) will be interpreted in vastly different ways." Greg L. Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic: Readings and Analysis* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1998), 463.

<sup>40</sup>"Apologetists must be aware that Christians and non-Christians would have no common notions (or self-conscious interpretations) if unbelievers were completely consistent in their unbelief—that is, apologetists must understand the fundamental opposition between Christ and non-Christian ultimate principles—so that they can effectively drive home the epistemological challenge to unbelievers that their autonomous systems of thought render it impossible to know anything at all. Given the antithesis between faith and unbelief, there is no truth that is religiously neutral, or of which believers and unbelievers could have a common theoretical knowledge or interpretation." Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic*, 424.

on his knees in worship to God, but he exalts and worships the created thing rather than the creator.

These three categories of thought for interpreting Van Til's rendering of absolute antithesis are helpful because they prompt the reader to refine his articulation of antithesis, as well as acknowledge that Van Til's antithesis was not as absolute as some of his passages quoted above may indicate. In addition, Van Til's application of antithesis was much softer than his theory. In practice, Van Til was not so rigid as to embrace the idea that a believer may never agree with an unbeliever. "On the basis of common grace, Van Til maintains that unbelievers know some truth despite their sin and its effects."<sup>41</sup> Frame notes that when he raised the issue with Van Til of agreeing with an unbeliever (as Van Til's student), Van Til said "we can agree with Hume, or Kant, or Plato, or Aristotle, about this or that, but not about their 'basic' ideas."<sup>42</sup> Though the form of pagan speech may reflect more apparent agreement with Christians than is actually present, and though the basic worldview structure of non-Christians is antithetical to Christian thought, the statements here or there may or may not be antithetical to Christian thought.<sup>43</sup>

If the best rendering of the epistemological antithesis is that of worldview orientation, what is the best qualifying word for the antithesis? Whereas Van Til suggested an absolute antithesis, Masselink suggests more helpfully another word in place of "absolute." "Terms such as 'principliant antithesis,' 'qualitative antithesis' or

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<sup>41</sup>Frame, *Cornelius Van Til*, 188.

<sup>42</sup>Frame further extends this idea by documenting Van Til's agreement with secular writers Kroner and Jaeger on the Greek *paideia*, secular scientists about "details," and "non-Christians that can teach much that is good, right, and true." Frame, *Cornelius Van Til*, 209.

<sup>43</sup>Frame suggests that Van Til's talk of antithesis often appeared more rigid than his actual use of the concept. Van Til was forced to use the concept more fluidly in practice because of the overly simplistic nature of his conclusion that the noetic effects of sin comprehensively amount to a propositional falsification of the unbeliever's every utterance. Frame notes that Van Til inconsistently recognized this insight. Frame, *Cornelius Van Til*, 210-11.

‘positive antithesis’ express our meaning more correctly.’<sup>44</sup> In suggesting these descriptor terms, Masselink is identifying that reality that the relationship between Christians and culture is in some ways characterized by antithesis but not *absolutely* and in all ways characterized by antithesis.<sup>45</sup> As Van Til rightly pointed out, there does exist between the Christian and culture an absolute antithesis of worldview orientation; however, this antithesis of worldview orientation does not necessitate an absolute antithesis of epistemological content. Pagans misuse and misdirect the truth that they possess, but this misdirection does not eliminate the truth content. The absolute worldview orientation antithesis must be preserved alongside the mixed epistemological antithesis and commonality, leading the theologian to appropriate the epistemological contributions of culture with discernment.

### **Culture Appropriated as Ancillary**

Given the complex worldview antithesis between Christian and non-Christian culture, the foremost consideration concerning the discerning appropriation of culture’s epistemological contribution is Scripture’s authority. Given Scripture’s verbal and plenary inspiration, inerrancy and authority,<sup>46</sup> culture must be appropriated as ancillary in

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<sup>44</sup>William Masselink, *General Revelation and Common Grace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953), 232.

<sup>45</sup>Van Til and Masselink contended back and forth regarding this issue. Van Til preferred “absolute ethical antithesis.” Masselink argued that by affirming the antithesis as “absolute” then there is no room left for common grace or the remaining *imago Dei*. See the summary of this debate and Van Til’s response in Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 163-75.

<sup>46</sup>Space limitations prevent a full defense of this claim, which has been robustly attacked and adequately defended. For fuller treatments of the authority of Scripture, see Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, vol. 3 (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1999); John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Word of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2010); idem, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1987); Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, in *Prolegomena*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003); E. J. Young, *Thy Word is Truth: Thoughts on the Biblical Doctrine of Inspiration* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957); Dan McCartney and Charles Clayton, “Is the Bible True?” in *Let the Reader Understand: A Guide to Interpreting and Applying the Bible*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2002), 36-38; F. F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1988); D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge, eds., *Scripture and Truth* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992); idem, *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005); Michael S. Horton, *Covenant and*



the theological task. Scripture is the first and final authority for doing theology because it is the trustworthy Word of God.

As demonstrated in chapter 2, Grenz and others reject this description of Scripture's authority and view the general populace's spiritual intuitions to be inherently theologically trustworthy; one encounters God in the *vox populi*.<sup>47</sup> Were it not for the deep roots of culture's epistemological limitations and pagan culture's worldview orientation antithesis, this contention could be defensible. However, culture's limitation to speak truth systemically stems from the Fall and its effects on mankind.<sup>48</sup> Culture is limited in three specific ways that are each intimately connected to the fallenness of the world. The implication of these three limitations is that culture's theological articulation is a messy mixture of grace and idolatry that requires the trustworthy lens of Scripture in order to be rightly interpreted.

First, culture's epistemological contribution is limited due to the impact of the Fall on the human responsibility to image God, namely, that mankind is not what he once was. His ability to communicate truth is hindered and his ability to understand truth is weakened. The *imago Dei* was scathed by the fall. Mankind is not perfectly reflecting the Creator's design of imaging God, though he still images God in a limited and partial way.

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*Eschatology: The Divine Drama* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002); Meredith Kline, *The Structure of Biblical Authority* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1997); I. Howard Marshall, *Biblical Inspiration* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982); Craig A. Evans, and Emanuel Tov, eds., *Exploring the Origins of the Bible: Canon Formation in Historical, Literary, and Theological Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008). For a perspective alternative to the aforementioned theologically conservative scholarship, see also Karl Barth, *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, in *Church Dogmatics*, trans. G. T. Thomson, vol. 1 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1936); C. H. Dodd, *The Authority of the Bible*, rev. ed. (New York: Harper Torchbook, 1962); James Barr, *The Bible in the Modern World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973); William Barclay, *By What Authority?* (Bungay, Suffolk: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1974).

<sup>47</sup>Turnau identifies additional adherents of this view in Turnau, *Popologetics*, 169.

<sup>48</sup>Andrew Greeley, *God in Popular Culture* (Allen, TX: Thomas More, 1989), 91. Greeley points out that this limitation is not present in Catholic theology, which does not admit to the impact of the Fall on mankind. "In Catholic theology, which believes that human nature is deprived but not depraved, experiences of the Holy and the hope renewing and stories out of those experiences are not evil or idolatrous but revelatory" (ibid.).

The distortion of the image has led to a distortion in the image-bearer's theological articulation in culture.<sup>49</sup>

Secondly, culture as an epistemological source is incomplete and partial because general revelation is incomplete, distorted and partial. If a people group's lowest common denominator of revelation is incomplete, distorted and partial, their theological expression in cultural form will reflect these limitations. The only way for culture to transmit more content than what general revelation affords is for special revelation to be available also. Special revelation, by definition, is not available to all people of all time. Similar to general revelation, every apparent gleam of light found in culture is outshone by the brighter light of Scripture.<sup>50</sup> Though existential revelation in culture and special revelation of Scripture share a complementary purpose, Scripture is superior to culture. Calvin recognized this relationship as it pertains to natural revelation (though many have argued that natural law has no place in theological formulation)<sup>51</sup> He discussed natural

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<sup>49</sup>Because this limitation was discussed thoroughly in chap. 3, this chapter will develop the second and third limitations.

<sup>50</sup>Donald Bloesch joins the chorus of this oft-sung refrain in this dissertation: care must be taken not to undermine the Word of God with culture, offering a message that is "virtually indistinguishable from that of reasonable men and women of good will." Donald Bloesch, *A Theology of Word and Spirit: Authority & Method in Theology*, Christian Foundations, vol. 1 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1992), 34-35.

<sup>51</sup>Graham A. Cole, *He Who Gives Life: The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit*, Foundations of Evangelical Theology, ed. John S. Feinberg, vol. 4 (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007), 112. Cole notes the idea of confining the Holy Spirit's work to the sphere of the saints is not recent. Further, he points to Origen, *De Principiis*, ed. and trans. Henry Bettenson, *The Early Christian Father* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), I.iii.v. In the history of interpretation in Reformed circles, natural law is debated territory. For a stimulating historical analysis of natural and supernatural theology, see Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 1.2.6. Michael Gurney rehearses the skepticism among Evangelicals concerning natural law, but also notes the recent resurgence of interest in natural law. Michael Gurney, "Natural Law Revisited: Three New Texts," *Cultural Encounters* 5 (2009): 117-19. He reviews three recent books, two of which deserve immediate—albeit brief—mention. The first author that Gurney reviews is J. Daryl Charles, who persuasively links the consistent theme and commitment to natural law that is present in Roman Catholic thought to include Reformed theologians Martin Luther and John Calvin as well. J. Daryl Charles, *Retrieving Natural Law: A Return to Moral First Things* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008). Second, Gurney draws attention to Stephen J. Grabill, who vigorously challenges the apparent incongruity between natural law and Reformed theology. Stephen J. Grabill, *Rediscovering the Natural Law in Reformed Theological Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006). Grabill provides extensive analysis that makes a similar case as Charles: Calvin

revelation first because natural revelation has been active in the world from the beginning; it is a human being's first access point to God. Though natural revelation has chronological priority, it does not possess ontological priority, because Scripture "communicates far greater truths about God and contains knowledge of God as redeemer."<sup>52</sup>

Nonetheless, God's purpose for revelation in nature is in harmony and continuity with the purpose of revelation in his word; "both share 'the very same goal,' the invitation 'to fear God, then to trust in him.'"<sup>53</sup> Scripture confirms and clarifies the incomplete revelation from nature.<sup>54</sup> Therefore, in a similar way, we have to say both yes and no to the echoes of truth we discover in culture.<sup>55</sup> Though culture is far from

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valued natural law and employed its insights even in his challenging of Rome. The current antipathy for natural law among many Protestants can be traced back to Karl Barth's "definitive rejection of natural theology." Gurney, "Natural Law Revisited," 117. Barth is certainly right to acknowledge human depravity and its effects on cognition, but this acknowledgement does not necessitate outright rejection of natural knowledge. Grabill's conclusion concurs with N. T. Wright: becoming a Christian does not necessarily include saying no to the good world that God has made. It does include turning away from the corruptions into which the world has fallen, but it also includes a simultaneous focus on heaven and earth. N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: Harper One, 2008), 228-29.

<sup>52</sup>Edward Adams, "Calvin's View of Natural Knowledge of God," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 3 (2001): 283. Calvin acknowledged that "God bestows the actual knowledge of himself upon us only in the Scriptures. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, Library of Christian Classics, vol. 20 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1960), 1.6.1. "That brightness which is borne in upon the eyes of all men both in heaven and on earth is more than enough to withdraw all support from men's ingratitude—just as God, to involve the human race in the same guilt, sets forth to all without exception his presence portrayed in his creatures. Despite this, it is needful that another and better help be added to direct us aright to the very Creator of the universe."

<sup>53</sup>Adams, "Calvin's View of Natural Knowledge of God," 284.

<sup>54</sup>*Ibid.*, 283. Masselink states this idea more strongly: "General revelation cannot be understood rightly except in the light of special revelation." Masselink, *General Revelation and Common Grace*, 88.

<sup>55</sup>"Despite the negation of natural theology and the limitations of general revelation, we may expect to find in them both intimations and confirmations of the gospel, provided that our apprehension of the grace of God, the sinfulness of men and women and the priority of Christ are not compromised. In short, when the gospel is preached it is appropriate to point to the ways in which, when accepted, it makes sense of our experience of the world. Experience intimates, the gospel enlightens; the gospel interprets, experience confirms."

*sufficient* in the formulation of theology, it still retains *significance* in the formulation of theology.

Revelatory light in culture is not only limited by being incomplete, distorted and partial, but it is limited by being reflective or derivative. Culture bears similarity in many ways to general revelation.<sup>56</sup> Bloesch wrote of general revelation, “it is not a source of the light of Christ but a witness to it.”<sup>57</sup> P. T. Forsyth compares these two lights of Scripture and general revelation to the sun and moon. The moon is not the source of light itself, but it only reflects the light of the sun, which is the source of truth, Christ.<sup>58</sup> Employing Norman Geisler’s analogy comparing general revelation to special revelation,<sup>59</sup> culture is a brief flash of lightning in the night sky and Scripture is the consistent shining of the day sun. Though culture is incomplete and derivative, it is worth celebrating when it connects us with delight to the natural world God has made<sup>60</sup> and reflects the glory of the Son. Bloesch summarizes: “The lights that reflect the glory of God in nature and history are signs of grace more than means of grace, indications of his goodness and mercy rather than their source. . . . These echoes are anticipations and

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<sup>56</sup>Though, as argued throughout, culture and general revelation cannot be conflated. Culture reconfigures general revelation; this reconfiguration reflects grace and idolatry, truth and convolution.

<sup>57</sup>Bloesch, *A Theology of Word and Spirit*, 165. Karl Barth spoke similarly to Bloesch and Forsyth when he spoke of “little lights in nature and history that reflect the light that is in Christ.” See Karl Barth, *The Christian Life*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 115-53. Also see Bloesch, *Theology of Word and Spirit*, 149-56 for a discussion on “Karl Barth and His Adversaries.” Barth did not believe truth in culture to be self-evident, but he did speak of people of faith capably hearing the voice of God in the secular world, though the voice is decisively and definitively in Jesus Christ, and the measure of truth in these other words is Christ.

<sup>58</sup>P. T. Forsyth, “Revelation Old and New,” in *Revelation Old and New: Sermons and Addresses*, ed. John Huxtable (London: Independent, 1962), 15.

<sup>59</sup>Norman L. Geisler, *Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 33.

<sup>60</sup>Kevin J. Vanhoozer, ed. *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), s.v. “Creation,” by Daniel J. Treier.

indications of revelation.<sup>61</sup> The criterion for the truthfulness of a claim to truth is Christ as revealed in Scripture (John 14:6; 1 John 4:1-6). Culture is not the source of truth; it is a reappropriation of the truth into a meaningful and interpretable text that simultaneously confuses and clarifies the truth. Because revelation in culture is derived from the source of revelation, it need not be discarded, but discerned.<sup>62</sup>

Without special revelation, we would never be able to read the truth of which culture speaks. Bavinck summarized this nicely. “As it is, Scripture sheds a light on our path through the world, and puts into our hand a true reading of nature and history. It makes us see God where we would otherwise not have seen him. Illumined by it, we behold God’s excellences spread abroad in all the works of his hands.”<sup>63</sup> Even as man beholds God’s excellences displayed in the world, he finds no ultimate resolution and satisfaction concerning the truth. Bavinck concurs, “when we review this whole history of civilization from a religio-moral point of view, we get from it a deep sense of dissatisfaction and disillusionment.”<sup>64</sup> This dissatisfaction that culture brings does not lead us to discard culture’s contribution, but to embrace its prompt to continue looking for the revelation to be completed.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>61</sup>Bloesch continues, “But they do not constitute revelation except when united with the one great light—God’s act of self-disclosure in Jesus Christ.” Bloesch, *Theology of Word and Spirit*, 175.

<sup>62</sup>Bruce Demarest concurs: “The law written on the heart informs the creature of his spiritual duties vis-à-vis the Creator and Judge of the world. Only when one is conscious of his guiltiness does the receptivity of grace become a possibility. Only when one sees himself as a sinner before the God of Creation does the offer of reconciliation in the gospel make sense. If intuitional and inferential knowledge of God were not present, God’s gracious communication to man in the form of special revelation would remain a meaningless abstraction. Special revelation, then, begins as the point where man’s natural knowledge of God ends. Natural theology is properly the vestibule of revealed theology. . . . Special revelation completes, not negates, the disclosure of God in nature, providence, and conscience.” Bruce A. Demarest, *General Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 250-51.

<sup>63</sup>Herman Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), 38.

<sup>64</sup>*Ibid.*, 37. Being derivative, culture only makes sense when viewed in light of the greater, more clear and complete revelation.

<sup>65</sup>Bavinck states, “When, therefore, we review the whole terrain of general revelation, we discover, on the one hand, that it has been of great value and that it has borne rich fruits, and, on the other,

A third limitation of culture springs from the limitations of common grace itself, particularly its intended effect and mankind's conflict with it. Since its purpose is not effectual to salvation, we cannot expect people to come to faith in God solely through an experience with human culture. Common grace serves the purposes of special grace.<sup>66</sup> As was argued earlier, common grace preserves mankind, endows him with gifts and enriches his world, and in doing so provides a sphere of operation for special grace.<sup>67</sup>

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that mankind has not found God by its light." Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith*, 59.

<sup>66</sup>Rather, common grace serves the purposes of special grace. Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 402. Also see Murray, "Common Grace," 2:104-06. In stark contrast to the Roman Catholics of his day, Bavinck argued that common grace and special grace are not two spheres of God's operation that are distinguishably opposed to one another; rather, they are tightly connected together and work in tandem. Bavinck, "Common Grace," 35-65. "By means of this organic way of relating nature and grace, the Reformation in principle overcame the mechanical juxtaposition and dualistic worldview of the Catholic Church." Bavinck, "Common Grace," 60. Kuyper also emphasized the connectivity between special grace and common grace. "So automatically we come to the question regarding the inter-relationship which exists accord to God's appointment between general grace and particular grace. *They are not each enclosed within the walls of its own terrain.* They work together in the same terrain. They, therefore, come in touch with each other. They meet each other in the same plane of life. They often are mutually interwoven. Involuntarily they work upon each other. You find both in the same human heart, in the same life, in the same family, in the same generation, in the same people. . . ." Kuyper, quoted in Masselink, *General Revelation and Common Grace*. 240. In other words, the pagan is confined to the realm of common grace and from the realm of special grace, whereas the Christian is not confined to the realm of special grace. "Without common grace special grace would not be possible because special grace would have no material out of which to erect its structure. Common grace not only provides the sphere in which, but also the material out of which, the building fitly framed together may grow up into a holy temple in the Lord. It is the human race preserved by God, endowed with various gifts by God, in a world upheld and enriched by God, subsisting through the means of various pursuits and fields of labour, that provides the subjects for redemptive and regenerative grace. . . . [t]o conclude . . . common grace provides the sphere of operation of special grace and special grace therefore provides a rationale of common grace." Murray, "Common Grace," 2:113, 116. Bruce Demarest concurs: "The law written on the heart informs the creature of his spiritual duties vis-à-vis the Creator and Judge of the world. Only when one is conscious of his guiltiness does the receptivity of grace become a possibility. Only when one sees himself as a sinner before the God of Creation does the offer of reconciliation in the gospel make sense. If intuitional and inferential knowledge of God were not present, God's gracious communication to man in the form of special revelation would remain a meaningless abstraction. Special revelation, then, begins as the point where man's natural knowledge of God ends. Natural theology is properly the vestibule of revealed theology. . . . Special revelation completes, not negates, the disclosure of God in nature, providence, and conscience." Demarest, *General Revelation*, 250-51.

<sup>67</sup>"Without common grace special grace would not be possible because special grace would have no material out of which to erect its structure. Common grace not only provides the sphere in which, but also the material out of which, the building fitly framed together may grow up into a holy temple in the Lord. It is the human race preserved by God, endowed with various gifts by God, in a world upheld and enriched by God, subsisting through the means of various pursuits and fields of labour, that provides the subjects for redemptive and regenerative grace. . . . [t]o conclude . . . common grace provides the sphere of operation of special grace and special grace therefore provides a rationale of common grace." Murray,

Bavinck articulates a commonly embraced rendering of the connectivity between common grace and special grace. “It is common grace which makes special grace possible, prepares the way for it, and later supports it; and special grace, in its turn, leads common grace up to its own level and puts it into its service.”<sup>68</sup> Common grace is bestowed on humans who in turn revolt against its purposes.

Mankind is in conflict with common grace because he is in rebellion against God himself (Rom 1-3; Eph 4:30).<sup>69</sup> Common grace restrains man’s sin even as he fights to be fully “liberated” to indulge in it. He is in conflict with the knowledge of God, suppressing and perverting it continuously until God removes his restraint entirely.<sup>70</sup>

Though the Spirit is currently striving to keep men and women alive while yet convicting of sin, the day will come when this striving will cease<sup>71</sup> (Gen 6:3; Acts 7:51; Rom 1:28ff.). Though culture is never outside the overruling power of God, sometimes God permits it to take itself to destruction (Rev 6).

Meanwhile, culture surrenders its epistemological contribution under compulsion. Thus, we must learn from the culture of those who do not know Christ even as we acknowledge their blindness to how this revelation has been impacted by the fall and then redemption in Christ.<sup>72</sup> The Lausanne Covenant rightly states that the co-existence of common grace and sin leads us to believe that “because man is God’s creature, some of his culture is rich in beauty and goodness. Because he is fallen, all of it

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“Common Grace,” 2:113, 116.

<sup>68</sup>Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith*, 38.

<sup>69</sup>D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Great Doctrines of the Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2003), 2:27.

<sup>70</sup>Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith*, 37. The irony here is that the very thing that the unregenerate resists is that which God uses to restrain. General revelation “by means of common grace, serves to restrain the eruption of sin.”

<sup>71</sup>*Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>72</sup>Russell D. Moore, “Natural Revelation,” in *A Theology for the Church*, ed. Daniel L. Akin (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2007), 116.

is tainted with sin and some of it is demonic.”<sup>73</sup> Thus, the limitations of common grace prompt us to appropriate culture as ancillary to Scripture because it is restraining sin from having its full effect, not fully reversing its effects.<sup>74</sup> In concert with Bavinck’s view of common grace, this dissertation develops “a theological worldview that . . . enables us to acknowledge the importance of creation and human culture as good gifts of God that not only form the arena of his redemptive activity but are themselves subject to redemption.”<sup>75</sup>

This conclusion that culture is itself subject to redemption reveals the dangerous tendency to over-extend the effect of common grace and over-prioritize existential revelation; over-extending the effects of common grace gravitates toward the errors against which a strictly natural theology fights.<sup>76</sup> The limitations of common grace

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<sup>73</sup>“The Lausanne Covenant,” <http://www.lausanne.org/en/documents/lausanne-covenant.html>. (accessed October 13, 2011).

<sup>74</sup>Sin has not only distorted man’s ability to communicate truth, but it has impeded man’s ability to receive truth. Peter Jensen summarizes the Barthian assault on natural theology, revealing the flawed presupposition of human neutrality. “Natural theology mixes works and grace because of a defectively optimistic anthropology, and opens the door to additional information about God or alleged special revelation from him to supplement what we already have.” Peter Jensen, *The Revelation of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002), 104. The implications of this distortion impacts those who view culture as a broader expression of God’s revelation that frees the evangelist in his proclamation of the gospel. For example, Detweiler and Taylor believe that “common grace subverts preconceived notions of how, when and through whom God chooses to communicate. It makes God bigger and the evangelist’s burden lighter.” Craig Detweiler and Barry Taylor, *A Matrix of Meanings: Finding God in Pop Culture* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 17. In their methodology, the appeal of using culture to teach spiritual truth is that it can build a bridge to reach people who are hostile to the Scriptures; but the problem with this approach is that it fails to recognize the effects of sin in the hearer: unbelievers do not simply reject the Scripture, they reject the authority of general revelation and revolt against its claim to life as well (Rom 3:10ff.). Calvin rightly says, “God has sown a seed of religion in all men. But scarcely one man in a hundred is met with who fosters it, once received, in his heart, and none in whom it ripens—much less shows fruit in season. . . . [Men] entangle themselves in such a huge mass of errors that blind wickedness stifles and finally extinguishes those sparks which once flashed forth to show them God’s glory. Yet that seed remains which can in no wise be uprooted: that there is some sort of divinity; but this seed is so corrupted that by itself it produces only the worst fruits.” Calvin, *Institutes* 1.4.1. Consider Clowney’s assertion: “it is precisely at the heart of a culture that rebellion from God will be most evident.” Edmund Clowney, *The Church* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1995), 179.

<sup>75</sup>Raymond C. Van Leeuwen, introduction to “Common Grace,” by Herman Bavinck, trans. R. C. Van Leeuwen, *Calvin Theological Journal* 24 (April 1989): 37.

<sup>76</sup>“That natural theology is the chronological starting-point gives it an unfortunate influence over the way revealed faith is set out. Since the findings of natural theology must be regarded as certain, the



lead us to conclude: “Human experience is not alien to the gospel, though the gospel has priority as the fundamental revelation of God.”<sup>77</sup> The champion of absolute antithesis, Van Til, agrees:

But for all this we would still maintain, and this, we believe, is essentially Calvin’s view, that he who reads nature aright reads it as the Christian reads it. It is only when we thus press the objective validity of the Christian claim at every point, that we can easily afford to be ‘generous’ with respect to the natural man and his accomplishments. . . . Then why not cooperate with those with whom we are *in* this world but with whom we are not *of* this world? Our cooperation will be just *so far as* and *so far forth*. It will be a cooperation so far as the historical situation warrants.<sup>78</sup>

Scripture operates as the principiant guide in the exegesis of culture. Bavinck has pointed out that this model has been the model for Christian theologians of all times.<sup>79</sup>

The arts and sciences have their *principium* not in the special grace of regeneration and conversion but in the natural gifts and talents that God in his common grace has also given to nonbelievers. Therefore Christian theologians of all times have also profited from pagan art and learning and have insisted upon a classical education for every man of learning, including the theologian. They were not blind to the dangers of such an education, and desire that it take place under Christian leadership. But they nevertheless maintained the right and independence of the arts and sciences, requiring only that they be sanctified by the Spirit of Christ. Scripture itself, they maintained, gave them freedom to this end.<sup>80</sup>

In other words, Scripture possesses the authority to confirm culture’s truth and challenge culture’s falsehood, wherever it may be found. In concert with Bavinck, Masselink also said that the Christian has the right to incorporate true fragments of culture in its enterprise. Of course, “These fragments must be examined carefully

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Bible is read through the eyes of the natural theologian with a tendency to mold the special to the shape of the natural. Most important of all, in order for human reason to be capable of discerning the truth by natural theology, the effect of the fall on the image of God in humankind is held not to involve the corruption of the mind.” Jensen, *The Revelation of God*, 102.

<sup>77</sup>“Human thought characteristically moves from what is known to what is unknown . . . . The gospel speaks of common human experiences; in each case the gospel takes our inadequate understanding of the experience and gives us new and powerful wisdom about it. The reinterpretation is often so intense that it constitutes a revolution, a conversion of thought and practice.”

<sup>78</sup>Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 95.

<sup>79</sup>As I have argued in chap. 3, however, the basis for culture (“arts and sciences,” as Bavinck renders it here) is not found in common grace, but the *imago Dei* and cultural mandate.

<sup>80</sup>Bavinck, “Common Grace,” 64.

according to the criterion of our Reformed principles of science derived from special revelation. So there can be a cooperation between the two to a certain degree.”<sup>81</sup> The cooperation between the two requires a clear order of authority. The next section clarifies this hermeneutical priority.

### **Maintaining the Hermeneutical Priority**

With these principles of qualified antithesis, the authority of Scripture, and the ancillary position of culture firmly established, how might the theologian proceed in employing culture in the theological task? As seen in the “theology embracing culture” paradigm articulated in chapter 2, the foremost immediate danger is the elevation of culture to equal or greater authority as Scripture. In a framework in which culture is equal to Scripture, the Bible is not the authority that judges or confronts culture, but is merely one partner in the conversation. For proponents of this new literacy, the Bible assumes a less traditional role in which the priority of Scripture and culture is reversed. Detweiler and Taylor typify this approach.

Borrowing at least a page from theologian Karl Barth, we approach our faith . . . with the Bible in one hand and pop culture in the other. Most Christian attempts to engage pop culture have begun with the Bible, placing it as the standard against which pop culture must be judged. . . . We have bridged that gap by reading our Bible *through* the grid of pop culture, what scholars call reversing the hermeneutical flow.<sup>82</sup>

In other words, the goal is to see theology through the lens of culture and create a theology *from* culture rather than a theology *for* culture.<sup>83</sup> Their theology from culture stems from their anthropocentric perspective. “Pop culture is our marketplace—

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<sup>81</sup>Masselink, *General Revelation and Common Grace*, 250.

<sup>82</sup>Detweiler and Taylor, *Matrix of Meanings*, 10; Johnston, *Real Spirituality*, 80. Turnau attributes the introduction of this reversal of the hermeneutical flow to theologian Larry Kreitzer in the 1990s. William D. Romanowski and Jennifer L Vander Heide survey and critique this method in Romanowski and Heide, “Easier Said than Done: On Reversing the Hermeneutical Flow in the Theology and Film Dialogue,” *Journal of Communication and Religion* 30 (March 2007): 40-64.

<sup>83</sup>Detweiler and Taylor, *Matrix of Meanings*, 16.

the arena we visit daily to encounter issues of life and death, to discover what it means to be human, to hear the questions society asks, to meet God. The marketplace can (and must!) inform our theology.”<sup>84</sup> The problem with reversing the hermeneutical flow is that one does not deepen his understanding of the Bible, but reaffirms already existing beliefs by providing corroborating illustrations in culture.<sup>85</sup>

Culture becomes popularly accepted by masses of people because it reinforces and clarifies already held convictions.<sup>86</sup> This theology of the marketplace does not confront, but confirm. This theology of the marketplace wrongly assumes a favorable view of mankind; mankind does not need to be changed, but affirmed. It assumes that the way things are is the way things should be. This theology refuses to acknowledge the apocalyptic nature of culture, that culture rightly understood interrupts the status quo and challenges our distorted assumptions and sinful way of life.<sup>87</sup>

For those who would reverse this flow, culture supposedly takes on a sacramental function, carrying the grace of God into our lives.<sup>88</sup> Culture is an arena in which God contacts us and we experience him. Thus, they can affirm, “God shines through even the most debased pop cultural products.”<sup>89</sup> The raw and uncut discussion of God is happening in culture, and we should experience God through it.

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<sup>84</sup>Ibid., 27.

<sup>85</sup>Turnau, *Popologetics*, 181.

<sup>86</sup>Turnau also points out—as do Romanowski and Vander Heide, Turnau notes—that sometimes films can challenge our expectations and prejudices, helping us to clarify our own perspectives. Turnau, *Popologetics*, 181.

<sup>87</sup>For a thorough defense and application of this idea, see David Dark, *Everyday Apocalypse: The Sacred Revealed in Radiohead, the Simpsons and Other Pop Culture Icons* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2002).

<sup>88</sup>Turnau thoroughly critiques the notion that popular culture is sacramental in Turnau, *Popologetics*, 196-203.

<sup>89</sup>Detweiler and Taylor, *Matrix of Meanings*, 8. Johnston states this very pointedly when he suggests that movies are avenues for experiencing God. “Here the transcendent is disclosed through the material of reality, but in such a way as to manifest a reality that does not belong to this world. Or, to put

Unlike those who decry the decline of Western civilization, we believe a profound, profane, honest discussion of God, the devil, death, and the afterlife is sweeping pop culture. The stones are screaming, loud and proud (see Luke 19:39-40), giving God all kinds of unorthodox and creative ‘props.’ We can curse culture, ignore it, and hope it goes away, or we can wake up and raise the questions to which people want answers. We begin by excavating the spiritual insight lurking behind most artistic endeavors, even when those endeavors make our hearts ache and our ears burn.<sup>90</sup>

One of the troubling features of the questions that culture asks is that the pagans who craft culture do not express questions with a sincere and honest desire to know the truth. Quite the opposite is true. The questions are expressed with a desire to undermine, suppress and push aside anything that threatens autonomy and calls for submission. This suppression is not separated from self-deception. The suppressor of truth sincerely believes that he is honestly seeking answers. Meanwhile, he disregards the answers to his questions because they do not fit around the idea that he makes the rules.<sup>91</sup>

From the above quotation the fact is obvious that Detweiler and Taylor do not simply want to answer questions that culture raises, but look to culture for the answers. Culture is both asking and answering the questions. The fundamental flaw of this framework is its failure to reconcile the qualified worldview orientation antithesis between culture and Scripture and its failure to submit to the authority of Scripture.

This flaw is precisely why the interpretation of culture demands the Scriptural lens; culture *is not* a trustworthy copy of God’s revelation but Scripture *is* a trustworthy copy of God’s revelation. Consider an example from Scripture, in which God used the unregenerate to inform the regenerate. When God used the Chaldeans to speak to Israel he gave them special instructions regarding the message that they bore. As Turnau writes, “God didn’t expect the Israelites to *assume* that he was speaking through the Chaldeans

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the matter more simply, movies are a window through which God speaks. The experience of the holy cannot be programmed. It is a gift. However, some movies seem to predispose their viewers to receive such an experience. They are sacramental.” Johnston, *Reel Spirituality*, 161. Also see another description of culture as sacrament in Greeley, *God in Popular Culture*, 17.

<sup>90</sup>Detweiler and Taylor, *Matrix of Meanings*, 297.

<sup>91</sup>Greg Bahnsen, “The Crucial Concept of Self-Deception in Presuppositional Apologetics,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 57 (Spring 1995): 1-31.

*all the time*. He had to *tell them* through his inspired prophet Habakkuk.”<sup>92</sup> In other words, God’s Word initiates and informs our cultural exegesis.

This must be the case if, as Calvin suggested, “many monstrous lies” defile the works of the unregenerate, though they are sprinkled with droplets of truth.<sup>93</sup> How are we to discern the difference? Scripture functions as the lens through which we can discover and employ the droplets of truth and we can identify and confront the monstrous lies.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter has argued that the antithesis must be preserved, not in an absolute sense, but qualified primarily as an antithesis of worldview orientation. This chapter has also affirmed the authority of Scripture and its place of primacy in the theological task. Finally, as an implication of the primacy of Scripture and the antithesis, this chapter has argued that culture’s role in the theological task is ancillary; the proper hermeneutical flow prioritizes Scripture above and before culture.

The conclusion of the matter is that “Christians can learn things from unbelievers. But they should always look at the teachings of unbelievers with an especially critical eye, for sin distorts the understanding of God and therefore of his world.”<sup>94</sup> An image originating from Exodus instructs us in this spirit of maintaining worldview orientation antithesis. Upon deliverance from the hand of Pharaoh, the Israelites were instructed by God to plunder precious metals from the Egyptians as if they were the Israelite’s defeated foe. The Israelites took of Egypt’s precious metals and later used them to construct the tabernacle, for which God blessed them (Exod 25:1-8; 35:4-9). However, they used some of these precious metals to construct a golden calf, for which

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<sup>92</sup>Turnau, *Popologetics*, 184.

<sup>93</sup>Calvin, *Institutes* 2.2.18.

<sup>94</sup>Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 435.

God judged them (Exod 32:1-4). Their blunder was not plundering the Egyptians, but sundering the treasures from the purposed glory of their Creator in order to fashion a god according to their liking. Just as the Egyptians, Christians are free to plunder the epistemological treasures of culture, but they must be certain to fire a product that is fit for God, not a twenty-first century idol.

CHAPTER 5  
APPLICATION TO THE THEOLOGICAL TASK

**Introduction**

This chapter summarizes the primary arguments set forth in this dissertation and illustrates incorrect and correct application of these contentions. The illustrations of incorrect application will take form in the examples of Leonard Sweet's *The Gospel According to Starbucks* and Craig Detweiler and Barry Taylor's cultural exegesis of American marketing and advertising. Finally, this chapter will briefly rehearse five helpful examples that illustrate the positive employment of various cultural media. (1) Paul's employment of Greek poetry in Acts 17. (2) C. S. Lewis' formulation of the idea of "the *Tao*." (3) Orthodox Presbyterian Church pastor David Feddes' exegesis of a talk radio show. (4) Ted Turnau's exegesis of the movie, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004). (5) Ken Myers' routine practice of cultural employment in the Mars Hill Audio Journal.

**Summary**

Chapter one illustrated that the human experience is inherently a spiritual experience and that many turn to culture as their primary means of spiritual experience. Culture's pervasiveness, as well as its great shaping power, entail that the theologian give it due attention, not ignoring or dismissing it. As the theologian discerns right and wrong theological expression in cultural form he harnesses the potential to deepen his knowledge and appreciation of God and the world, as well as the potential to sharpen his

confrontation of culture's convolution.<sup>1</sup> The theologian must refuse to capitulate to compromising the worldview orientation antithesis, thus allowing the contributions of culture to overshadow the objective supremacy of the Word.

This discussion between theology and culture is multi-faceted and complex and does not afford an easy or neat solution. Chapter two rehearsed lessons learned from Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture*, and interacted with two existing models of culture in the theological task: (1) Theology transcending culture and (2) theology embracing culture. Sin and common grace's complex impact on culture renders these two positions to be extreme. Rather than wholesale rejection or embrace of culture in the theological task, the theological task should carefully employ culture.

Chapter three argued that culture is the image bearing activity of crafting theologically meaningful texts offered to God as worship and shared in community as a means of theological enrichment.<sup>2</sup> In the beginning, culture was purposed by God to be his image-bearers' staging of truth in word and deed as an act of worship and witness. Though perfect in the beginning, culture has since been corrupted. When man rebelled, he misdirected his worship and distorted his cultural staging of truth. One day, culture will reflect the redemption brought about by Christ Jesus. Redeemed humanity will cultivate the new heavens and the new earth as they worship God alone and rightly stage the truth of God in word and deed.

Humanity's current season in redemption history bears the effects of the Fall. Thus, culture reflects and compounds the distortion of sin. However, God graciously holds back the effects of sin from being as bad as they could be, and graciously

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<sup>1</sup>Cultural historian Warren Susman applies this idea of culture as a tool for waging warfare as he cautions that groups will attempt to persuade others to their vision of the world using "all the possible instruments of persuasion the culture provides." Warren I. Susman, *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 288.

<sup>2</sup>This theological expression was defined above as "existential revelation." Culture is existential revelation because it is an *imago Dei* activity that reveals truth about God in everyday life.



empowers all people to articulate the truth as they simultaneously suppress it in their worldview orientation.<sup>3</sup> Thus, culture is a complex mixture of idolatry and grace.

Additionally, chapter three demonstrated that culture functions as a multi-dimensional human experience of revealing and shaping meaning. Culture invites response, exchange and interpretation. Culture reflects, refracts, shapes, inoculates, congregates, and shares. These functions highlight the ideological revealing and shaping power that culture possesses and leads the cultural analyst to consider attentively and skillfully its positive and negative potential.

Culture's worldview revealing and shaping powers have serious implications, particularly for the theologian. The theologian must reject naiveté and superficiality. The epistemological antithesis between the Christian theologian and unregenerate culture must be preserved, not in an absolute sense, but qualified primarily as an antithesis of worldview orientation. The authority of Scripture and its place of primacy in the theological task lead the theologian to appropriate culture as ancillary. Thus, the proper hermeneutical flow prioritizes Scripture above and before culture. A hermeneutic of caution that prioritizes Scripture will enable the theologian to appropriate God's excellent gifts, even those found in the culture crafted by the unregenerate. Plundering the epistemological treasures of unregenerate culture does not give the theologian a creative license to fire new idols, but to bring the truth in subjection to the worship and witness of God.

### **Examples of Theology Employing Culture**

This dissertation has contended that theology should employ culture with rigorous discernment that balances the realities of sin and grace. As examined above, some such as Robert Johnston emphasize too heavily God's grace. Jim Dekker helpfully

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<sup>3</sup>The simultaneous articulation and suppression of the truth by the unregenerate is actually clearly seen and confirmed in their rehearsal of it, when interpreted through the lens of Scripture.

responded to Johnston by calling all theologians back to this balance. “In stepping out of the church to do theology in culture, we still need a hermeneutic. . . . We need a discernment that comes from understanding what these forms of general revelation are and a discernment that holds theologies of sin and redemption in complementary ways with common grace.”<sup>4</sup> Dekker is prompting the theologian to develop a grace and idolatry balanced hermeneutic that engages the ideological marketplace of culture but maintains the proper hermeneutical flow.

Helton Cobb has engaged this marketplace, dismally observing that exclusive cultural exegesis raises far more questions than it answers. “[j]ust as popular culture has been busy trotting out rehabilitated images of God and fretting in theological ways over the human condition, it has also been generating a variety of conceptions about salvation.”<sup>5</sup> Cobb continues, “Through various ecstatic aids, motley collections of icons, diversionary promises of consumer advertising, genres of rock music, and therapeutic introspection, we turn to popular culture to prod, entice, and feel ourselves into believing that our sinful ways can be redeemed, that obstacles to our happiness can be overcome and that we can enjoy more fulfilling lives.”<sup>6</sup> This next section will critique two such attempts: (1) Sweet’s cultural exegesis and formulation of the gospel that wrongly overemphasizes the revelatory power of culture, and (2) Detweiler and Taylor’s cultural exegesis of American marketing and advertising.

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<sup>4</sup>Jim Dekker, “Response to Johnston,” *Ex Auditu* 23 (2007): 73.

<sup>5</sup>Kelton Cobb, *The Blackwell Guide to Theology and Popular Culture* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), 260-61.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, 261.

## Negative Examples

**Leonard Sweet.** Leonard Sweet has combed the marketplace, exegeting a cultural icon for the purpose of formulating the gospel. Sweet, in *The Gospel According to Starbucks*, says,

We can learn what Starbucks has come close to perfecting—that life is meant to be lived with passion, and that passion is found and practiced through experiences, connection, symbols and images, and the full participation of every part of your being. Not only do these simple truths explain the phenomenal growth of Starbucks Coffee Company, they also point out the blind spots, weaknesses, and failures of the church to serve people at the level of life’s bottom line: passion and meaning.<sup>7</sup>

According to Sweet, Starbucks informs the life that Jesus promised in abundance (John 10:10). Jesus recommended that his disciples learn something from the wisdom of the world: they pursue their dreams with greater passion and intelligence than “the people of the light.”<sup>8</sup> Christians have much to learn about faith as a lived experience, rather than a thought experiment that is weighed down with rationality. Doctrine and theology are fine for theological study, but have little impact at the level of daily life experience.<sup>9</sup> Starbucks teaches us that people live for engagement, connection, symbols, and meaningful experiences. An exegesis of Starbucks answers the problem of people of faith to get back to the elementary aspects of their faith, spirituality, and the gospel they proclaim.<sup>10</sup>

Sweet issues an invitation to “learn how to meet God in an irresistible experience, how to trade religious duty for spiritual passion, and how to engage in the life of faith in close relationship with other wayfarers.”<sup>11</sup> He proposes to exegete the text of a Starbucks cup to reveal a grande gospel, frappuccino faith and venti life of romance and

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<sup>7</sup>Leonard Sweet, *The Gospel According to Starbucks: Living with a Grande Passion* (Colorado Springs, CO: WaterBrook, 2007), 4.

<sup>8</sup>Sweet cites Luke 16:8. *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, 5-6.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, 6.

passion. This is the gospel according to Starbucks. The cup tells us about the deeper meaning of a spiritual life: “Jesus modeled the life of faith as both a consuming philosophy and a daily practice—a full life engagement.”<sup>12</sup>

Why resort to a chain of coffee shops in order to talk about the biblical meaning of life with God? Sweet responds:

Well, for several good reasons. Starbucks signifies passion and relationship and meaningful experiences. It also demonstrates the power of small numbers in our small and getting-smaller-every-day world. The power of one has never been greater. And biblically, the power of one person plus God cannot be surpassed on earth . . . not to mention the power of two people plus God.<sup>13</sup>

For Sweet, this chain of coffee shops has succeeded where the church has failed: passion, relationship and experience.

Sweet says that if Matthew, Mark, Luke or John described faith, they would say that it is not primarily a matter of belief. Rather, they would emphasize aspects of life that are closer to what we would call passion.<sup>14</sup> The gospel is *grande* passion—life lived on an EPIC scale: Experiential, Participatory, Image-rich, and Connective. Starbucks took an old standby and made it into an EPIC beverage that millions of people feel they cannot live without.<sup>15</sup> Starbucks’ marketing brilliance captures the contextual intelligence that should characterize Christians. The passion-filled EPIC life is about humility: God taking someone small and insignificant and immersing her in an experience of faith. Christ is a living force to be experienced, not a historical figure to be studied.<sup>16</sup>

The gospel is not experienced and enjoyed until one participates in it. In the same way that Starbucks is an image rich medium that captures and holds attention, the

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<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 8.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 9.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 17.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 22.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 46.

gospel is a Word that became flesh and dwelt among us; Jesus is an image (man) and text (Word).<sup>17</sup> Whereas church used to be the place of choice for connecting, it has now replaced relational space with a propositional place. People are no longer going to connect with God and others in meaningful relationship, though they may be convinced of transcendent truth. Lastly, the lesson from Starbucks is a lesson of connectivity: Jesus—the master of connection—“brings the EPIC life full circle, from an earthly experience of spiritual clarity to the eternal connection that brings joy and juice to your soul.”<sup>18</sup> In other words, propositional truth is not the tie that binds us together in relationship. Conviction should be compromised for the sake of maintaining connectivity.

Though Sweet’s work may reveal helpful insights into the human experience, Sweet’s EPIC acronym leaves most components of the gospel according to the Bible strangely absent. It raises questions regarding Sweet’s intended audience and the reason for selecting the material that he did. Did Sweet intend this for believers? If so, remind believers of their glorious conversion accomplished by the grace of their Lord Jesus. Remind them of their union with Christ, justification before God, and sanctification throughout life, as Scripture teaches. Encourage them with God’s promise of preservation and glorification. Did Sweet intend this for unbelievers? Introduce them to the startling profundity of the sinfulness of mankind and the wrath of God that is resting on them even now. Call them to repentance and faith in Christ.<sup>19</sup>

Sweet’s formulation of the gospel through cultural exegesis is not the Gospel, but a fine example of pop-syncretism.<sup>20</sup> His desire for trendy and hip has eclipsed God’s

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<sup>17</sup>Ibid, 107.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 138.

<sup>19</sup>For a few examples of people who articulate the gospel by prioritizing the Bible in the hermeneutical flow, see Bruce Demarest, *The Cross and Salvation: The Doctrine of Salvation* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1997); John R. W. Stott and Alister E. McGrath, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006); Anthony A. Hoekema, *Saved by Grace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994).

<sup>20</sup>This phrase is employed by Turnau to describe Craig Detweiler and Barry Taylor’s cultural

demand for truth and humility. His presentation of the gospel has become what Mark Dever has rightly warned against: “a very thin veneer spread lightly over our culture’s values, becoming shaped and formed to its contours rather than to the truth about God.”<sup>21</sup> The point is not that the Starbucks phenomenon cannot teach us anything about the human experience.<sup>22</sup> The point is that insofar as it is not communicating the gospel according to God it is not communicating the gospel. Sweet’s cultural exegesis has succumbed to truncating the Gospel by presenting the gospel as less than repentance and faith, a cultural vision masquerading as truth.<sup>23</sup>

The gospel is not friendly to culture; it is oriented in stark opposition to it. It contains a warning of judgment to come on rebellious humanity.<sup>24</sup> Culture is in need of the gospel; it cannot communicate the gospel from within its own system because it is bound up in its own finitude and sin.<sup>25</sup>

Because of the gospel’s transformative nature, one of the theologian’s goals must be to demythologize culture’s stories and props.<sup>26</sup> The biblical gospel unmasks and exposes culture’s mythological framework. “This debunking of the values of modern culture includes uncovering the accretions to biblical faith within the community of believers as well as the perversions perpetuated as truth within the larger culture. The end

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exegesis on advertising. Ted Turnau, *Popologetics* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2012), 189.

<sup>21</sup>Mark Dever, *The Gospel and Personal Evangelism* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007), 32.

<sup>22</sup>“We should appreciate culture of those who do not know Christ, noting the insights they have into the human condition, even as we acknowledge their blindness to how this true information has been impacted by the fall and then redemption in Christ.” Russell D. Moore, “Natural Revelation,” in *A Theology for the Church*, ed. Daniel L. Akin (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2007), 116.

<sup>23</sup>Richard Lints, *The Fabric of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 116.

<sup>24</sup>Peter Jensen, *The Revelation of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002), 49.

<sup>25</sup>“This gospel restores life and hope—not as the world views life and hope but rather on the terms established by God.” Lints, *The Fabric of Theology*, 114.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, 116.

result is that the community is to be freed not from the demands of the gospel but from the distortions of modern culture.”<sup>27</sup> The gospel proclamation is a missionary endeavor that demands change:

The missionary encounter of the gospel with the modern world will, like every true missionary encounter, call for radical conversion. This will be not only a conversion of the will and of the feelings but a conversion of the mind . . . that leads to a new vision of those things are and, not at once but gradually, to the development of a new plausibility structure in which the most real of all realities is the living God whose character is “rendered” for us in the pages of Scripture.<sup>28</sup>

This conversion is necessary because this gospel message is from above. Our hope for a gospel that saves rests in the belief that God can and does communicate across cultures.<sup>29</sup> His truth transcends cultures in such a way that cultural limitations are not indomitable; the Gospel transforms the worldview orientation of the unregenerate. “We are not so locked into our ecclesial or cultural positions that its truth cannot make itself known to us—the Word addresses the hearer—even to the extent that a contemporary perspective from which a text is viewed can be challenged, modified and even overturned by the text.”<sup>30</sup> Because culture is the handmaid of Scripture, “The meaning of revelation can be ascertained with the aid of the conversation that takes place between the Bible and my experience within a particular culture, but it is the biblical revelation that possesses the unique authority to challenge and transform my culture-bound experience.”<sup>31</sup>

Formulating the gospel begins with the Scriptures. “The gospel, therefore, depends for its very life . . . on the prior existence of a written word of God, and issues in

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<sup>27</sup>Ibid.

<sup>28</sup>Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 64.

<sup>29</sup>Lints, *The Fabric of Theology*, 114.

<sup>30</sup>Gabriel Fackre, “The Use of Scripture in My Work in Systematics,” in *The Use of the Bible in Theology: Evangelical Options*, ed. Robert K. Johnston (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1997), 211.

<sup>31</sup>Lints, *The Fabric of Theology*, 115.

the preached and then written words of Jesus.”<sup>32</sup> The task of gospel recovery does not cry out for cultural exegesis; it demands a recovery of the Bible.<sup>33</sup> D. A. Carson offered an acute challenge for the church to overcome its irresponsible ignorance of the Bible by returning to it as a metanarrative that shapes and informs one’s understanding of the Christian faith.

The Bible as a whole document tells a story, and, properly used, that story can serve as a meta-narrative that shapes our grasp of the entire Christian faith. In my view it is increasingly important to spell this out to Christians and to non-Christians alike—to Christians, to ground them in Scripture, and to non-Christians, as part of our proclamation of the gospel. The ignorance of basic Scripture is so disturbing in our day that Christian preaching that does not seek to remedy the lack is simply irresponsible.<sup>34</sup>

The theologian’s primary objective must be to define the gospel based on the Bible because nothing matters more than God’s message in Scripture.

Sweet’s work falls far short of his stated goal to articulate the gospel. Though he insufficiently addresses the gospel, his exegesis is not without merit. He draws some helpful conclusions from Starbucks about the human experience, poignantly stressing its communal nature. He reminds the church of her need for passion, connectivity and relationship. He encourages the church to move beyond mediocrity.

His exegesis illustrates that discerning treasures of God in culture requires that the theologian embrace a multi-layered approach to culture. Though a particular cultural phenomenon—Starbucks in this case—may not have been crafted from a faith-filled heart that seeks to please God, it still brings God glory, albeit in a limited way. Though the cultural artifact may not possess the clearest or most accurate message about human flourishing, it may be evaluated based on its proportional relation to the truth. The theologian’s strategy must include a proper expectation of culture. Rather than exegeting

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<sup>32</sup>Jensen, *The Revelation of God*, 58.

<sup>33</sup>John Piper, *God is the Gospel* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2005), 25.

<sup>34</sup>D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 84.



Starbucks for a fresh version of the Gospel, the theologian should exegete Starbucks for an understanding of where God's grace is restraining and enabling, and where mankind's rebellion distorts the truth about human existence into idolatry.

**Detweiler and Taylor.** Turnau exposes an additional example of cultural syncretism, Detweiler and Taylor's cultural exegesis on advertising.<sup>35</sup> In chapter 2 of *A Matrix of Meanings*, Detweiler and Taylor helpfully point out the influence and shaping power of advertising. They argue that consumerism is the spirituality of our culture, and that this materialistic spirituality is actually a celebration of what it means to be truly human. Their conclusion is not that this is a part of *fallen* humanity, but a part of *natural* humanity. How would they come to this conclusion, except by reversing the hermeneutical flow and prioritizing culture above Scripture? Scripture teaches that locating personal identity in the things that one possesses is a value of fallen humanity.<sup>36</sup>

Their cultural exegesis is complete with a "spirituality of advertising," identifying new commandments that pit authenticity against authority and community against isolation/alienation. In their framework, theology takes its cues from culture, rather than culture receiving correction from theology. Turnau identifies three problems that surface.<sup>37</sup> (1) Detweiler and Taylor present a false alternative between speaking authoritatively and listening. Though they do not admit this as a possibility, we should both speak authoritatively and listen. (2) They rightly identify skepticism of postmodernists against authority but fail to question *why* postmodernists reject authority. Turnau identifies the real reason: it is a strategy for avoiding the real God.<sup>38</sup> (3) These

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<sup>35</sup>What follows is a distillation of Turnau's summary and analysis of Detweiler and Taylor in Turnau, *Popologetics*, 189-96.

<sup>36</sup>"Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions" (Luke 12:16).

<sup>37</sup>Turnau, *Popologetics*, 192-93.

<sup>38</sup>"They would rather have a god that they can deal with on their own terms, a god that won't

authors confuse strategy with principle, reformulating the message in the name of relevance. In their meditation on advertisement they contend that “to be fully alive is to shop.” While Detweiler and Taylor rightly point to the dominating nature of the cravings present in mankind, they fail to recognize that these cravings are not satisfied in material possessions. This failure stems from their contention that theology must be practical, authentic, embodied, and communal rather than propositional, theoretical, and individualistic. In other words, culture has jettisoned Scripture in the theological task.

This also leads them to suggest that the doctrine of God needs rethinking because it is out of date, has lost credibility, is too exclusive and does not age well.<sup>39</sup> The Christian community must reformulate its doctrine of God because its current rendering does not fit well with contemporary culture. Since culture is continually changing, every doctrine is negotiable. These implications of their hermeneutical reversal bring into full view the distance between Detweiler and Taylor and confessional evangelicalism.

In response, Turnau helpfully suggests that we “respond sensitively and authentically to the questions and themes of contemporary culture without selling out, without implicitly denying biblical principles for the sake of being relevant.”<sup>40</sup> Rather than embracing syncretism, the theologian must identify the complex combinations of grace and idolatry that are present in the world, celebrating God’s grace and critiquing the world’s idolatry.

Vern Poythress helpfully warns of the danger of these types of cultural exegeses on the part of Sweet and Detweiler and Taylor. Poythress warned Christians of the counterfeiting subtleties of syncretism but also the triumph of God in faithful Christian scholar-soldiers.

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expose and challenge their disobedience and unbelief.” Ibid., 192-93.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., 194.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., 195.

The world of ideas, like all other aspects of this world, contains counterfeiting. We send subtle mixes of truth and error. Moreover the counterfeiting is institutionalized, so that when we are immersed in a particular culture we may be unaware of it. Yet this counterfeiting contains spiritual poison. The book of Revelation promotes spiritual health by giving us a vision of God and his ways that informs us both of the wealth of his truth, present throughout his creation, and the subtle enticements of the counterfeiting of his truth. It also assures us by proclaiming the certainty of the final defeat of this appalling deceit. But the battle is not merely intellectual. It involves our whole being. The work of scholarship does not represent a safe retreat in which rationality may function in an unconfused manner but rather one area among many in which the cosmic battle goes on in full force.<sup>41</sup>

The theologian must not succumb to the pressure to conform to the spirit of the age, but must identify the true and the good in the midst of the counterfeit. Bavinck has helpfully stated, the theologian “cannot let go his belief that the revelation of God in Christ, to which he owes his life and salvation, has a special character. This belief does not exclude him from the world, but rather puts him in position to trace out the revelation of God in nature and history, and puts the means at his disposal by which he can recognize the true and the good and the beautiful and separate them from the false and sinful alloys of men.”<sup>42</sup> Sweet, Detweiler and Taylor provide two good examples of the dangers of reversing the hermeneutical flow and the cultural syncretism that results.

### **Positive Examples**

How might the theologian apply the primary contention of this dissertation, that he should employ culture in the theological task in an ancillary role to Scripture? The multi-layered approach that the theologian must develop correlates with Francis Schaeffer distinction in his valuation of art.<sup>43</sup> He argued that art should be evaluated along four basic standards: 1) technical excellence, 2) validity, 3) intellectual content and 4) the integration of content and vehicle. Schaeffer notes that because many have not distinguished between technical excellence and content much culture has been scorned

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<sup>41</sup>Vern Poythress, “Counterfeiting in the Book of Revelation as a Perspective on Non-Christian Culture,” *JETS* 40, no. 3 (September 1997): 418.

<sup>42</sup>Herman Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), 37.

<sup>43</sup>Francis Schaeffer, *Art and the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006), 62-71.

and ridiculed.<sup>44</sup> Rather than discarding all culture that is intended by its crafter to suppress the truth, we should distinguish between those components of culture that are partially right and partially wrong.

Consider, for example, the unregenerate postmodern, who expresses incredulity toward metanarratives and consequently the notion of authorial intent; all the while he exposes his own absurdity by suggesting that his version of postmodern epistemology applies to all people of all time. He does this while intending for the reader will be able to rightly understand and interpret his meaning. He may even do this with rich rhetoric and persuasive panache. Schaeffer's contribution is that one can appreciate the formal eloquence and excellence with which the unregenerate postmodern speaks while simultaneously rejecting his misdirected and convoluted content. In this way, the theologian can learn from the form of unregenerate culture while rejecting outright his content.<sup>45</sup> The primary point that this correlation with Schaeffer makes is that the theologian benefits from developing a multi-layered hermeneutic of culture. Several examples will clarify the implications of this contention.

**Paul.** Paul demonstrates the appropriation of a true statement that is misdirected, employing it for the witness and worship of God. In Acts 17:28 Paul quotes favorably half a verse from Aratus, the Greek poet, "For we are also his offspring." In this scenario, Paul affirms the statement of the unregenerate Greek poet, though he adds significance, depth and proper worldview orientation to these words. Calvin says that Paul uses the "testimony of a poet wherein was extant a confession of that knowledge

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<sup>44</sup>Ibid., 62-63.

<sup>45</sup>Much more has been said regarding the influence of form. Marshall McLuhan proposed that the medium, rather than the content, should be studied for its influence and effect. Hence, the phrase "the medium is the message." For the development of McLuhan's idea, see Marshall McLuhan, *The Medium is the Message* (London: Penguin, 1967).

which is naturally engraven in men's minds."<sup>46</sup> He states, "such sayings of the poets came from no other fountain save only from nature and common reason."<sup>47</sup> Whereas Aratus applied these words to Jupiter, Paul applied these words to the true God. Whereas Aratus revealed how darkened and perverted the mind of man had become, Paul showed how God is the source of the life of men. "Calvin connects this directly with the image of God in man and with the creative fatherhood of God."<sup>48</sup> Paul appropriated a true statement that a pagan employed for idolatry and employed it for the witness and worship of God. Though Aratus suppressed this general revelation and deafened himself to the ultimate meaning of his statement, he composed this poetry using the borrowed capital of God's truth. Paul seized on this as an opportunity to expose the people's worldview underpinnings and redirect their worship to God.

In this situation, Paul applied what John Leith calls the "theologian's obligation."

The theologian of the church is under obligation to test theological statements by the rubrics of a particular community. . . . Cultural expressions of the faith are "less pure" than expressions of the faith within the confines of the church's life, such as worship, church polity, and theology. Nevertheless, there are cultural achievements in literature, visual arts, architecture, economics, and political life that do in significant measure embody the Christian faith. These cultural expressions of the faith tell us something about the faith.<sup>49</sup>

Paul modeled well the theologian's responsibility to test the cultural expressions of the faith, identify their idolatry and God's preservation of truth in their poetry, and then redirect their true statement into a proper worldview orientation.

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<sup>46</sup>John Calvin, quoted in William Masselink, *General Revelation and Common Grace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953), 96.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid.

<sup>49</sup>John H. Leith, *Introduction to the Reformed Tradition*, rev. ed. (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981), 200.

**C. S. Lewis.** What Paul has done in identifying a misdirected truth in pagan culture is not dissimilar to what C. S. Lewis has done in identifying general revelation that has found expression in a variety of cultural forms.<sup>50</sup> Lewis identified common conceptions in various forms that he calls “the *Tao*,” a phrase borrowed from the Chinese. Lewis collected these common conceptions from independent testimonies to lend credibility to the presupposition that “civilizations have arisen in the world independently of one another.”<sup>51</sup> “This conception in all its forms, Platonic, Aristotelian, Stoic, Christian, and Oriental alike, I shall henceforth refer to for brevity simply as ‘the *Tao*.’ . . . It is the doctrine of objective value, the belief that certain attitudes are really true, and others really false, to the kind of thing the universe is and the kind of things we are.”<sup>52</sup> Lewis identifies eight laws that he traces through literature of independent civilizations, illustrating that these independent civilizations agree on certain truths concerning life.<sup>53</sup> These general principles of truth are present in the writings of ancient Egyptians, Chinese, Hindi, Greek philosophy and Roman philosophy, among others. Lewis’ conception of the *Tao* makes a valuable contribution, in that it illustrates via anecdote that pagan culture retains epistemological value.

The *Tao* is restricted, not boasting extensive or authoritative revelatory power on its own merit. In other words, the *Tao* is not an attempt at comprehensively determining morality via widespread opinion. Rather, it illustrates what Scripture has said was true all along, that God commonly graces all people with general revelation,

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<sup>50</sup>Lewis wrote, he is not trying to *prove* its validity by the argument from common consent, since its validity cannot be deduced. C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York: Macmillan, 1955), 95.

<sup>51</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup>*Ibid.*, 27-29.

<sup>53</sup>These eight laws are (1) the law of general beneficence, (2) the law of special beneficence, (3) duties to parents, elders, ancestors, (4) duties to children and posterity, (5) the law of justice, (6) the law of good faith and veracity, (7) the law of mercy, (8) the law of magnanimity. *Ibid.*, 95-118.

restraining them from being as evil as they could be and empowering them to retain bits of truth.

**David Feddes.** A more contemporary example of one who has modeled helpfully the appropriation of cultural insights is Orthodox Presbyterian Church pastor David Feddes. He notes that the Christian has a lot to learn from Dr. Laura Schlessinger's talk radio show.<sup>54</sup> Feddes says that her advice is not a sufficient foundation for life, but this should not stop us from focusing on what we can learn from her. She taught that God matters and his law matters. Like the Pharisees, Laura accurately emphasized good social graces but wrongly represented salvation. In short, David Feddes appreciates Dr. Laura's positions while acknowledging that she does not teach the gospel.

**Ted Turnau.** In his book *Popologetics*, Turnau illustrates the positive role that culture can play in the theological task.<sup>55</sup> As one example of the positive contribution of culture to the theological task, Turnau cites the movie *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004). After recapping its storyline Turnau explains how the movie crafted an uncanny metaphor for forgiveness and unconditional love as Matthew 18:21-22 describes. For Turnau, culture did not define forgiveness in a way that Scripture supplemented. Rather, culture supplemented the rendering of forgiveness that Turnau already understood Matthew 18:21-22 to have articulated. To the best of Turnau's knowledge, the film's screenwriter, Charlie Kaufman is not a Christian, nor is the director, Michel Gondry. The best explanation for how unregenerate culture-crafters can

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<sup>54</sup>David Feddes, "Learning from Dr. Laura," *New Horizons in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church* 22, no. 2 (February 2001): 8-10, 20.

<sup>55</sup>He identifies God's common grace fragments in culture as *footprints of God*; these are shards of grace that reflect God's work in culture. Turnau, *Popologetics*, 68.

help Christians deepen their understanding of forgiveness and unconditional love is God's common grace.<sup>56</sup>

**Ken Myers.** A final contemporary example of one who regularly appropriates cultural insight is Ken Myers of the Mars Hill Audio Journal. Mars Hill Audio Journal is

committed to assisting Christians who desire to move from thoughtless consumption of contemporary culture to a vantage point of thoughtful engagement. We believe that fulfilling the commands to love God and neighbor requires that we pay careful attention to the neighborhood: that is, every sphere of human life where God is either glorified or despised, where neighbors are either edified or undermined. Therefore, living as disciples of Christ pertains not just to prayer, evangelism, and Bible study, but also our enjoyment of literature and music, our use of tools and machines, our eating and drinking, our views on government and economics, and so on.<sup>57</sup>

The Journal's stated goal simultaneously targets the engagement and enjoyment of culture, regardless of the culture's worldview orientation. Myers hosts guests who hold to a variety of worldviews; his program is not geared to critique the worldview represented by each guest, but to promote the thoughtful engagement and careful enjoyment of culture that supports human flourishing. Myers' appropriation of cultural insights springs from a robust embrace of common grace that subsumes the insights of unregenerate intellectuals under the rubric of Scripture.

These examples of the Apostle Paul, C. S. Lewis, David Feddes, Ted Turnau and Ken Myers provide the reader with several diverse applications of this dissertation's primary contention.

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<sup>56</sup>Turnau is also careful to follow up this movie's positive contribution to our understanding of forgiveness with the negative distortion that the movie also portrays.

<sup>57</sup>Statement taken from "Mars Hill Audio Journal," [www.marshillaudiojournal.org](http://www.marshillaudiojournal.org) (accessed February 17, 2013).



## Conclusion

The impact of the remaining *imago Dei*, common grace, and general revelation on culture that reflects a mixture of grace and idolatry leaves the theologian with no easy way forward. Dennis Johnson suggests that though the theologian's foray into the epistemological merits of culture is messy, difficult and sometimes cloudy, cautious and vigilant biblical discernment enables successful navigation.

So there seems to be no "neat" and theologically-convincing way to mark a boundary between subject matter in which non-Christian thought is really dangerous (because of its origin in antitheistic presuppositions) and areas in which non-Christian thought is more benign (because common grace holds sway). We have no formula for anticipating at the outset how a particular scholar's rebellion against God's truth will manifest itself in his scholarship, or how it may be restrained from error by God's common grace. In this complex situation, kneejerk rejection of ideas, perspectives, arguments, or evidence simply because their source is non-Christian is not a mark of Reformed and Van Tillian presuppositional vigilance. It may rather be a symptom of intellectual laziness or insecure defensiveness, seeking an easy escape from the arduous and sometimes puzzling task of exercising biblical discernment.<sup>58</sup>

This process of discernment requires biblical wisdom, not simply intellectual skill and savvy. In giving wisdom, knowledge, and understanding (Prov 2:6), God empowers the theologian to reject gullibility and naiveté.

If the existential revelation of culture and the special revelation of Scripture possess some unity of content and purpose, as this dissertation has argued, the theologian can freely use this data with thanksgiving rather than fear.<sup>59</sup> Expressing the unity of God's creation and revelation and his ongoing work in the entire cosmos, Kuyper suggests that "there can be nothing in the universe that fails to express, to incarnate, the

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<sup>58</sup>Dennis E. Johnson, "Spiritual Antithesis: Common Grace, and Practical Theology" *Westminster Theological Journal* 63 (2002): 89.

<sup>59</sup>Sometimes general revelation reveals negatively the brokenness of the world, confirming Scripture's depiction of the world's fallen state. This reality compels the theologian to mine both culture's positive and negative contributions, then to complete the revelation with Scripture. For example, Dennis Johnson suggests that "The Marxist ideology that animates some social scientists reduces all human experience to economics and class struggle. It may nevertheless stimulate Christian theologians to pay attention to how the Gospel itself addresses issues of economic and social justice." Johnson, "Spiritual Antithesis," 92.

revelation of the thought of God.”<sup>60</sup> Frame notes that we can use extra-scriptural information to understand Scripture (such as culture), but that when we do we must hold *loosely* to this information.<sup>61</sup> This discriminate cooperation is not a foreign idea to Calvin. He strongly argues that if we despise common grace gifts of art, science or skill we dishonor the Spirit.<sup>62</sup> Very simply, Kuyper, Frame, and Calvin are expounding on the conviction that God is at work not only in creation, but also in culture, beyond the scope of the church.<sup>63</sup>

When writing concerning the unity between general and special revelation, John Frame explicitly makes this connection and emboldens the theologian to employ extra-biblical insights.

I find [this sort of emphasis] refreshing and exciting; its implications for theological work are innumerable. For one thing, it means that we need not be embarrassed about using *extra-scriptural information* to interpret Scripture. If indeed the creation were somehow autonomous, then we might fear that the use of such data might to

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<sup>60</sup>Abraham Kuyper, *Wisdom and Wonder: Common Grace in Sciences & Art*, trans. Nelson D. Kloosterman (Grand Rapids: Christian’s Library, 2011), 39.

<sup>61</sup>John Frame, *Van Til: The Theologian* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Pilgrim, n.d.), 27.

<sup>62</sup>John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, Library of Christian Classics, vol. 21 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1960), 2.2.15. “Whenever we come upon these matters in secular writers, let that admirable light of truth shining in them teach us that the mind of man, though fallen and perverted from its wholeness, is nevertheless clothed and ornamented with God’s excellent gifts. If we regard the Spirit of God as the sole fountain of truth, we shall neither reject the truth itself, nor despise it wherever it shall appear, unless we wish to dishonor the Spirit of God. For by holding the gifts of the Spirit in slight esteem, we contemn and reproach the Spirit himself.” Ibid. Anthony Hoekema summarizes Calvin’s contribution: “1) unbelievers may have the light of truth shining in them; 2) unbelievers may be clothed with God’s excellent gifts; 3) all truth comes from the Spirit of God; 4) therefore to reject or to despise the truth when it is uttered by unbelievers is to insult God’s Holy Spirit.” Anthony Hoekema, *Created in God’s Image* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 190. “Wherever then, these fruits of God’s common grace appear, it is our duty to make thankful use of them, to the honor of God and to the advancement of his kingdom.” H. Henry Meeter, *The Basic Ideas of Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990), 66.

<sup>63</sup>Douglas K. Harink, “Spirit in the World in the Theology of John Calvin: A Contribution to a Theology of Religion and Culture,” *Didaskalia* 9 (1998): 61-81. We certainly must exercise caution here, however. As Gerald Hawthorne points out, the Spirit’s activity in the world of nature is easily overemphasized. Hawthorne, *The Presence & the Power* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2003), 20. Hawthorne points us to “thoughtful scholars” who have done more work in this area: A. B. Davidson, *The Theology of the New Testament* (Edinburgh: n.p., 1904), 120; T. Rees, *The Holy Spirit* (London: n.p., 1915), 12, 13; W. D. Davies, *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism* (Philadelphia: Sigler, 1980), 189.

some extent hide the full truth of God's revelation. But creation is not independent of God. God controls it and speaks through all of it. And he has chosen to reveal himself, not by nature or Scripture alone, but always by the two together in organic union. Thus, we can use such data fearlessly and thankfully.<sup>64</sup>

If this dissertation's contentions regarding culture are correct, then the theologian should also employ its insights fearlessly and thankfully.

The trajectory of cultural hermeneutics explored in this final chapter propels the conversation forward. More should be written concerning the need for exegeting culture in the context of Christian community,<sup>65</sup> the demands of epistemic humility and submission to propositional revelation in Scripture, as well as the mechanics of situating the fragments of truth in the context of the biblical framework,<sup>66</sup> particularly with regard to the disciplines of practical theology and the integration of faith and scholarship.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>64</sup>Frame, *Van Til: the Theologian*, 24.

<sup>65</sup>“To navigate the intellectual and spiritual rip tides at the intersections of common grace and spiritual antithesis, the church needs to have its leaders and thinkers working together, speaking and listening to one another.” Johnson, “Spiritual Antithesis,” 13.

<sup>66</sup>“Prophetic judgment is a valuable component of cultural pessimism. Enlisting soldiers or even moral custodians for the culture wars, however, requires a much greater degree of cultural rejection than integrating faith and learning. Schaeffer, Henry, and Colson evidently wanted to pursue both missions; in reality, their “dark age” rhetoric served the former while subverting the latter.” James A. Patterson, “Cultural Pessimism in Modern Evangelical Thought: Francis Schaeffer, Carl Henry, and Charles Colson,” *JETS* 49 (December 2006): 20.

<sup>67</sup>Johnson identifies that “hostile, combative, and even exaggerated descriptions of contemporary culture threaten efforts to integrate faith and scholarship by undercutting Christian concepts of general revelation and common grace.” He applies this idea to the intersection between faith and the academic disciplines. “Philosopher Arthur Holmes, who has been a key player in faith-learning conversations at Wheaton College and the Council for Christian Colleges & Universities, has eloquently cautioned against a completely negative or critical stance toward contemporary culture, noting that it contains an ‘admixture of wheat and tares.’ In the context of a critique of Jacques Ellul’s cultural pessimism, Professor Holmes offered a more compelling vision, particularly for those involved in Christian higher education: ‘[T]o regard the secular as so beyond help as to turn us to spiritual rather than creational means ignores the reality of common grace. The God who makes the sun to shine on the just and the unjust alike graciously works through the processes of nature and history to preserve in sinful men a degree of wisdom and creativity and civil righteousness, and thereby he accomplishes his present purposes in society. Whatever men do that is right and good they do by the goodness of God, for every good gift comes from above. Whatever men know they know by the grace of God, for all truth is God’s truth wherever it be found. Hence, if secular culture is not as rotten as the purveyors of death and darkness images insist, Holmes’s paradigm will yield a more constructive correlation between faith and the academic disciplines.’” Johnson, “Spiritual Antithesis,” 12.

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## ABSTRACT

### A THEOLOGICAL JUSTIFICATION FOR THE CONTRIBUTION OF CULTURE TO THE THEOLOGICAL TASK

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This dissertation justifies the contention that culture contributes to the theological task in an ancillary way to Scripture. Chapter 1 introduces the primary issues. Chapter two interacts with two existing models of theology and culture, which respectively suggest that the theological task transcends and embraces culture. Chapter 2 also introduces a third way, that the theological task should employ culture. Chapter 3 justifies this thesis by demonstrating that culture is inherently a theologically meaningful text for three reasons: (1) God purposed for culture to be an expression of the *imago Dei* that stages truth in cultural form; (2) Post-Fall culture-producing image-bearers are enriched with truth content via general revelation; and (3) God graciously restrains post-Fall culture-producing image-bearers from being as sinful as they could be and God graciously enables humanity to retain positive epistemological value. Chapter 4 clarifies the worldview orientation antithesis that limits culture's value; though the antithesis limits culture's value in the theological task it does not eliminate it. Chapter 5 summarizes the conclusions set forth in this dissertation and briefly recounts several examples of individuals who model these conclusions rightly and wrongly.

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