

A THEOLOGY OF CULTURE

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An Essay

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by

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Modernity provided a socio-economical framework for conservative evangelicals to isolate themselves from the culture, thus withholding the gospel and its far-reaching implications and commandments from the vast majority of society. However, postmodernity will not allow twenty-first century Christians to be so reserved. Therefore, a theology of culture is essential for ministry in the context of today's culture. The purpose of this essay is to develop a theology of culture from a biblical assessment of God's expectation of and involvement in all of his creation within the confines of a pre and post-Fall time frame in order to rightly understand the gospel's relationship to the culture in everyday ministry.

Despite the current necessities for evangelical Christians to familiarize themselves with a sound biblical understanding of Christ and culture, this mandate is not a new concept with respect to how believers exist in creation. Culture is best defined as the worldview in which people perform and think inside of a particular geographical and societal setting. Under the umbrella of this definition, culture is as ancient as creation.

First, in a pre-Fall existence God created male and female in his own image commissioning them to populate the earth and to rule over his creation (Gen 1:27-31). Mankind's God-given mandate to multiply and to have dominion over all the earth implied the erecting of cities, establishment of personal relations, adaptation to differing environments, and care for animals and vegetation, namely man as an environmentalist. Man's worldview before original sin was God-centered in that people perfectly embodied an untainted lifestyle lived out in the image of God through relationships with each other

and creation itself. Also, humanity persevered under the law of God with regard to the single commandment given to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden (Gen 2:16-17). Thus, in this pre-Fall creation, mankind would have dwelt in a specific locale, developing cultural distinctives, and abiding under the lordship of God and the government of his law. Culture is not simply an intentional product of people's existence, but rather a necessary consequence of being created as living beings made to inhabit an earth designed for residency.

Second, in a post-Fall creation, God established a means of salvation by which the Jewish nation and others were able to please him through the conforming of their culture and personal lifestyles to the customs, statutes, and commandments of his covenant. In the Old Testament, especially the Pentateuch, God ordained a specific manner of life in which his chosen people were to live in coherence with a God-centered worldview (Deut 4:23, 6:4-6, 10:12-22). Even in a fallen world, God continued to demand that the world worship him as the One True God and walk in accordance with his ways throughout every area of life such as government, festivals, social relations, and religious piety and rituals.

The Great Commission text in Matt 28:16-20 is often used as an argument for the separation of the gospel and culture; however, this idea could not be farther from the truth. From this passage three qualities of the gospel's relationship to the culture may be deduced. First, as similar to Eden and even the O. T. covenant, Christ is portrayed as the sole Lord and King over his entire kingdom, namely the universe. Second, the citizens of this kingdom are to be disciples of Christ from all nations. This point identifies a particular identity and distinctness of those who will dwell in the eternal home of God.

Third, in v. 20, Christ tells the disciples to teach these nations to be obedient to all that he had commanded them. This aspect of their ministry implies that God's kingdom has a certain type of law and ethic. Thus, God's kingdom has a culture of its own which is the one that his people, as citizens of the kingdom of God, are intended to communicate and spread in a world blinded by false representations of culture (Phil 3:20). Furthermore, the apostle Paul affirms this truth as he declares that "all things were created *through* him and *for* him (Col 1:16, Emphasis added)."

A theology of culture must be understood in light of its role in redemptive history. As creative living beings, made in the image of God, the existence of culture is unavoidable. However, the culture of which the Scriptures speak of with regard to holiness, the kingdom ethic, a person's role in society, and even God as King and Lord, is in essence true reality. Thus, the Christian's role in today's culture is to communicate *real* culture through natural avenues of mankind's creative expression such as art, music, literature, technology, education, fashion, and food in order to bring all things under the lordship of Christ's dominion. This issue is often bogged down in attempts to understand how to be culturally relevant when instead Christians ought to simply be *cultural*. To be a part of one's culture in everyway except with respect to ministry in the forms of outreach and worship is contradictory not only to the gospel mandate but also to the *imago dei*. Obviously, not all of culture is at liberty to the Christian for involvement and transformation due to its depravity. However, Christians should be in a position to biblically define culture rather than being defined by it.

