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Toward a Biblical Understanding of Culture

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The missional church movement has significantly influenced evangelical churches in recent years, especially through its philosophy of evangelism and worship. Missional advocates argue that the church is part of the *missio Dei*—the mission of God—and thus it must see its ministries as fitting within that mission. Essential to the accomplishment of that mission is embedding the church in its target culture, which missional authors call "incarnation." In order to evangelize a culture, they argue, churches must contextualize the message of the gospel in the culture. According to the grandfather of the missional movement, Lesslie Newbigin, contextualization is "the placing of the gospel in the total context of a culture at a particular moment, a moment that is shaped by the past and looks to the future."[2]

This thinking influences the missional philosophy of worship as well. While missional advocates reject the "attractional worship" model of the church growth movement, they nevertheless insist that since believers are part of the culture in which they live, worship also must be contextualized to that culture. For example, Ed Stetzer argues that "worship must take on the expression that reflects the culture of the worshiper if it is to be authentic and make an impact."[3] Contextualization is a significant emphasis of Alan Hirsch as well, who argues that "worship style, social dynamics, [and] liturgical expressions must result from the process of contextualizing the gospel in any given culture."[4] Mark Driscoll based his entire church planting strategy on the principle of contextualization, arguing that churches must be willing to change regularly their worship forms "in an effort to effectively communicate the gospel to as many people as possible in the cultures around them."[5] Likewise, according to Jon Paul Lepinski, "The need for the Church to remain effective in speaking the 'current language' and to successfully engage all people and age groups is a

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[2]Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 2.

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

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

[5]Mark Driscoll, *The Radical Reformission: Reaching Out without Selling Out* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 80.

practice that can be seen in the life of Jesus. Christ's earthly life manifests the importance of relevancy."[6]

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

Common Missional Definitions of Culture

Likely the most influential early evangelical definition of culture comes from Lesslie Newbigin, who claims that culture is "the sum total of ways of living built up by a human community and transmitted from one generation to another."[7] Darrell Guder cites this definition early in *Missional Church*,[8] thus revealing its impact upon later missional thinking in the Gospel and Our Culture Network[9] and beyond. Other later definitions reflect similar thinking. For example, Alan and Debra Hirsch maintain, "Culture is a complex jungle of ideas, history, language, religious views, economic systems, political issues, and the like."[10] Kathy Black defines culture as "the sum attitudes, customs, and beliefs that distinguishes one group of people from another. Culture is transmitted through language, material objects, ritual, institutions, and art forms from one generation to the next."[11]

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

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[6]Jon Paul Lepinski, "Engaging Postmoderns in Worship: A Study of Effective Techniques and Methods Utilized by Two Growing Churches in Northern California" (D.Min. thesis, Liberty Theological Seminary, 2010), 6.

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

[8]Darrell Guder, *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 9.

[9]Newbigin's influence spread to North America in the 1980s, leading to the formation of the Gospel and Our Culture Network (GOCN) under the leadership of George Hunsberger; see www.gocn.org.

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

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

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

The Historical Development of the Missional Idea of Culture[12]

Historically, the term "culture" did not emerge in its common use until the late eighteenth century. The term itself is much older, its Latin roots centering squarely in discussion of agriculture. As early as 1776, however, the term began to be used metaphorically to describe what Matthew Arnold would later call "the best which has been thought and said in the world."[13] The term used this way first entered German philosophy in Johann Gottfried Herder's *Reflections on the Philosophy of History* (1776), in which he argued that each civilization progresses through a process of enlightenment at which point it begins to produce "culture." Thus the term was first used to describe what would today be more commonly called "high culture" or "the arts." This introduced a new vocabulary for describing differences among people groups, but it was not until the rise of the formal discipline of cultural anthropology that the broader idea of culture took its present form.

Darwinian evolutionism influenced all aspects of human inquiry in the mid-nineteenth century, including explanation of cultural differences. For example, Edward Tylor, the founding father of British anthropology, developed a theory of cultural evolution that describes stages of human history from primitivism to advancement. Tylor's attempt to explain differences among various people groups led to the formation of the discipline of cultural anthropology. This new discipline involved "the description, interpretation, and analysis of similarities and differences in human cultures."[14] Tylor's ideas reflect Herder's, but his understanding of culture was much broader. Instead of defining culture as the more advanced achievements of a society, Tylor defined it as "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired

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

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

[14]Paris and Howell, *Introducing Cultural Anthropology*, 4.

by man as a member of society."[15] Important to this definition is that everything in human society is a subset of the broader idea of culture, even religion; the subtitle to Tylor's monumental book reveals different aspects of what he understood as culture: "Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art, and Custom." Schusky explains how this all-encompassing definition of culture developed to form the field of anthropology:

> Scholars recast the history of marriage, religion, politics, the family, mythology, and other social forms, speculating on their origin and stage of evolution. Because such a wide variety of forms were examined, some intellectuals concluded that all aspects of human behavior were valid fields for study. Organization of the study should fall to anthropology, and its concept of culture should be such as to allow investigation of all these facets of human activity.[16]

Tylor was also an early advocate of cultural relativism, "the judgment of a practice only in relation to its cultural setting."[17]

The anthropological notion of culture took a third step in America with Franz Boas, whom Jerry Moore calls "the most important single force in shaping American anthropology."[18] Boas shifted cultural anthropology from an evolutionist position to what is called Historicism, which argues that cultures are not progressive advancements of one continuous evolutionary development, but rather that each distinct culture is a product of very specific historical contexts and thus can be understood only in light of those contexts. He was among the first to speak of plural cultures that share no direct connections; similarities that exist between cultures, Boas argued, are purely arbitrary or at most due to similar historical situations, an idea called Particularism. This further reinforced the notion of cultural relativism, denying any universal laws of culture and advancing the idea that cultures with different historical backgrounds may not be compared at all. Every cultural expression is learned within a particular historical setting; nothing is innate. This view of human culture became widely established, especially in American anthropology, becoming the *de facto* explanation for differences among civilizations.

The missional idea of culture, then, took shape within this anthropological climate. Charles H. Kraft acknowledges that the missional idea of culture draws from cultural anthropology: "When it comes to the analysis of such cultural contexts, however, it is likely that contemporary disciplines such as anthropology and linguistics, dedicated as they are to a primary focus on these issues, may be able to provide us with sharper tools for analysis than the disciplines of history and philology have provided."[19] Even if not deliberately,

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

[16]Schusky, *The Study of Cultural Anthropology*, 10.

[17]Ibid., 15.

[18]Moore, *Visions of Culture*, 42.

[19]Charles H. Kraft, "Interpreting in Cultural Context," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 21, no. 4 (December 1978): 358.

however, most missional authors adapt the view of culture held by cultural anthropologists. For example, one cannot help but notice the similarity between Tylor's influential definition of culture ("that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society"[20]) and Newbigin's definition ("the sum total of ways of living built up by a human community and transmitted from one generation to another"[21]). Yet the connection runs deeper than similarities between definitions. Like cultural anthropology, the missional church views the idea of culture and particular cultural expressions as neutral. Cultures develop independently of each other and may not be compared. Evangelical authors may cite specific content as sinful, but no cultural expression is unredeemable. For example, Stetzer states that "there is no such thing as Christian music, only Christian lyrics" [22] and that "God has no preference regarding style,"[23] implying that cultural forms in general are neutral and only lyrics may be judged as moral or immoral. Driscoll argues for the neutrality of culture by insisting that "it was God who created cultures,"[24] thereby rendering various cultural forms intrinsically good. Stanley Parris gets to the root of the issue by stating that since "a single biblical style is not commanded in Scripture,"[25] cultural styles are amoral. Mark Snoeberger helpfully summarizes a common evangelical view of cultural neutrality:

> There is a general assumption that culture is neutral, and either independent of or essentially in harmony with God: just as man retains the image of God in microcosm, so culture retains the image of God in macrocosm. As such, culture possesses aspects and attributes that escape, to a large extent, the effects of depravity. The Christian response to culture is merely to bridle various aspects of culture and employ them for their divinely intended end—glory of God.[26]

Most importantly, like cultural anthropologists, missional advocates understand religion as but one component of culture rather than the other way around. For example, the Hirsches list "religious views" as one element of culture,[27] and Newbigin himself states un-

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[20]Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, 1.

[21]Newbigin, *The Other Side of 1984*, 5.

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

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

[24]Driscoll, *Radical Reformission*, 80.

[25]Stanley Glenn Parris, "Instituting a Missional Worship Style in a Local Church Developed from an Analysis of the Culture" (Ph.D. diss., Asbury Theological Seminary, 2008), 2.

[26]Mark A. Snoeberger, "Noetic Sin, Neutrality, and Contextualization: How Culture Receives the Gospel," *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 9 (2004): 357.

[27]Hirsch and Hirsch, *Untamed*, 25.

equivocally, "Religion—including the Christian religion—is thus part of culture."[28] This position is also clear in their discussion of the relationship between culture and evangelism. According to missional authors, the gospel must be "contextualized" in a given culture so that the recipients will accept the message and change their religion, but the culture itself must not change. John Stott insists that conversion will not mean a change of culture: "True, conversion involves repentance, and repentance is renunciation. Yet this does not require the convert to step right out of his former culture into a Christian sub-culture which is totally distinctive."[29] Additionally, Driscoll explains that the gospel "must be fitted to" culture.[30] New believers are thus encouraged to worship using the cultural forms most natural to them. For example, Guder argues that "our changing cultural context also requires that we change our worship forms so that Christians shaped by late modernity can express their faith authentically and honestly,"[31] which follows the same line of reasoning as Hirsch when he claims that "it is from within their own cultural expressions that the nations will worship."[32] Kimball also affirms this idea: "Since worship is about our expressing love and adoration to God and leaders teaching people about God, then of course the culture will shape our expressions of worship."[33] Religion changes while culture remains unchanged, signifying that religion is only one element within the larger idea of culture.

This idea of culture is an essential component of the missional approach to all aspects of church ministry, including evangelism and worship. The modern definition of culture developed out of relatively recent ideas about anthropology. Prior to the Enlightenment, people groups were differentiated primarily by their religion; later, the way to account for differences was "culture." Neither New Testament authors nor pre-Enlightenment Christian authors discuss "culture" as such.

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

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[28]Newbigin, *The Other Side of 1984*, 5.

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

[30]Driscoll, *Radical Reformission*, 20.

[31]Darrell Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 157.

[32]Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, 138.

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

New Testament Parallels to the Missional Idea of Culture

Since cultural anthropology formulated the common understanding of culture, and since the term "culture" is not a biblical one, there is little reason to debate the definition itself. Rather, what is important for Christians concerned with culture is to determine, taking for granted the anthropological definition of culture, what ideas in Scripture may inform our understanding of culture. At least three separate categories of NT Greek terms possibly parallel the more contemporary idea of culture.

Terms Associated with Ethnic Identity

The first grouping includes terms translated with the English words "race," "tribe," "nation," "people" or "languages." These ideas are probably the most commonly cited by missional authors who are seeking to justify cultural neutrality. For example, Driscoll equates "race," "nation," and "culture," alluding to Revelation 7:9 when he insists that "God promised that people from every race, culture, language, and nation will be present to worship him as their culture follows them into heaven."[34]

The term representative of this group that Christian anthropologists mostly cite is ἔθνος (*ethnos*). For example, in commenting on Matthew 28:16-20, Christian cultural anthropologists Paris and Howell explain that "the word translated 'nations' here (*ethnos*) refers to the culture of a people, an ethnic group."[35] They directly equate ἔθνος with culture and insist that "cultural anthropology helps us fulfill the Great Commission by preparing Christians to go to all *ethnē* and speak and live effectively."[36] Additionally, the popularity of terms such as "enthnodoxology" among missional worship advocates reveals the assumption that this NT term proves the necessity of a multicultural approach to worship.

Of the 164 times it appears in the NT, ἔθνος is translated in the ESV as "Gentile" 96 times, "nation" 68 times, "pagans" three times, and "people" two times. Lexicons[37] define

[34]Driscoll, *Radical Reformission*, 100.

[35]Paris and Howell, *Introducing Cultural Anthropology*, 23.

[36]Ibid.

[37]While lexical definitions of terms are helpful in determining their meaning and use in the NT, it is important to recognize that authors of lexicons themselves often fall prey to contemporary reorientation of ideas. This is especially a potential problem in this area of cultural neutrality. If authors of a lexicon have been influenced enough by cultural anthropology so that they embrace its conclusions about culture and race, their definitions of terms such as ἔθνος may reflect a colored interpretation. Vern Poythress exposes this very sort of influence in "How Have Inclusiveness and Tolerance Affected the Bauer-Danker Greek Lexicon of the New Testament (BDAG)?" (*Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 46, no. 4 [December 2003]: 577–88). He argues that differences in the third edition of BDAG from previous editions "raise questions about political influence on lexical description" (574). Danker himself addresses the issue in the preface to the third edition:

> Also of concern are respect for inclusiveness and tolerance. But a scientific work dare not become a reservoir for ideological pleading, and culture-bound expressions must be given their due lest history be denied its day in court. It is an undeniable fact that God is primarily viewed patriarchally in the Bible, but translation must avoid exaggeration of the datum. "Brother" is a legitimate rendering of many instances

the term as "a multitude (whether of men or of beasts) associated or living together, . . . a multitude of individuals of the same nature or genus, . . . a race, nation, people group,"[38] or even specifically link it to the idea of culture: "a people, a large group based on various cultural, physical or geographic ties."[39] Lexicons do not define ἔθνος as culture itself, however, but rather identify culture as one element that unites an ἔθνος, as in Bullinger, who defines the term as "a number of people living together bound together by like habits and customs; then generally people, tribe, nation, with reference to the connection with each other rather than the separation from others by descent, language or constitution."[40]

Indeed, the term is used to designate groups of people who identify with common values. Missional authors assume that NT authors use ἔθνος as a parallel to "culture," yet this correspondence falls outside the common usage of the term. An ἔθνος may be united by shared culture, but it is not the same as culture. Hiebert agrees: "*Nation* (*ethnos*) means a community of people held together by the same laws, customs, and mutual interests."[41] The term refers to the group of people, not to the culture around which the group unites.

Furthermore, use of the term in the NT is normally intended to *blur cultural differences* rather than to highlight them. For example, the two passages cited above by missional writers use ἔθνος most clearly to signify something broader than the contemporary notion of culture. In Matthew 28:19, Jesus commands his followers to "teach all nations [ἔθνος]." Carson suggests that Matthew "uses *ethnē* in its basic sense of 'tribes,' 'nations,' or 'peoples' and means 'all peoples [without distinction]' or 'all nations [without distinction].'"[42] The point of the command is not, necessarily, to emphasize the cross-cultural reality of evange-

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of the term ἀδελψός, but when it appears that the term in the plural includes women (as in a letter to a congregation) some functional equivalent, such as "brothers and sisters," is required. (*BDAG*, viii)

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

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

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

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

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

[42]Frank E. Gaebelein, gen. ed., *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Volume 8: Matthew, Mark, Luke* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984), 596.

lizing each distinct cultural group as Engle insists;[43] rather "the aim of Jesus' disciples . . . is to make disciples of all men everywhere, without distinction."[44]

The other passage often cited by missional authors to prove that every culture is legitimate since people from every nation will be admitted into heaven is Revelation 5:9: "And they sang a new song, saying, 'Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe [φυλῆς] and language [γλώσσης] and people [λαοῦ] and nation [ἔθνους].'"[45] Here John uses four terms related to ethnic identity, but once again, John uses the terms not to emphasize cultural distinctions between various people groups but rather to signify all peoples without national or cultural distinctions. For example, Mounce states of the terms in this verse, "It is fruitless to attempt a distinction between these terms as ethnic, linguistic, political, etc. The Seer is stressing the universal nature of the church and for this purpose piles up phrases for their rhetorical value."[46] Likewise, Thomas argues, "The enumeration includes representatives of every nationality, without distinction of race, geographical location, or political persuasion."[47] These conclusions regarding the use of ἔθνος apply equally to nearly synonymous terms in Revelation 5:9 such as φυλή (*phulē*; "tribe"), γλῶσσα (*glōssa*; "language"), and λαός (*laos*; "people").

Indeed, the NT perspective on race seems to be that of eliminating racial distinctions rather than highlighting them. The use of another term related to race, Ἕλλην (*Hellēn*; "Greek"), illustrates this point. According to Paul, in Christ there is not distinction between Jew and Greek (Gal 3:28; Col 3:11; 1 Cor 12:13). Rather, all are united into one newly distinct body.

This leads to a final passage of note, 1 Peter 2:9, which uses ἔθνος in a slightly different manner: "But you are a chosen race [γένος], a royal priesthood, a holy nation [ἔθνος], a people [λαὸς] for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light." Peter calls the church a holy nation, here used metaphorically to describe the new people God has created in the church. Hiebert explains:

> The term was also used at times of Israel as the people of God united by their covenantal relation to him, making them distinctly his nation. It is in that latter sense

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

[44]Gaebelein, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Volume 8: Matthew, Mark, Luke*, 596.

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

[46]Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 136.

[47]Robert Thomas, *Revelation 1-7 Commentary* (Chicago: Moody, 1992), 401.

> that Peter applied the term to the church, which forms a unique international nation having a common spiritual life from God and committed to his rule. *Holy* indicates its separation from the nations of the world and consecration to God and his service. Its position of separation demands that the members must not, like Israel of old, stoop to the sinful practices of the world (1:15-17).[48]

The same is true for γένος (*genos*; "race"), which has a similar meaning: "The word *race* (*genos*) denotes the descendants of a common ancestor and thus designates a people with a common heritage, sharing the unity of a common life."[49] And once again, "people" (λαὸς) describes a group united by a similar ancestry.

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

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

Terms Related to "the World"

The second category of NT terms that may indicate a parallel with the contemporary idea of "culture" includes words related to the "world order." These terms include αἰών (*aiōn*; "age," "world") and κόσμος (*kosmos*; "world"). They can refer to the physical earth, people in general, or a period of time. However, at least three passages in particular use these terms in ways that might be construed as parallel to the anthropological idea of culture, especially by those who consider culture to be an inherently evil influence.

The first is John 17:14–16:

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

[48]Hiebert, *First Peter*, 134.

[49]Ibid., 132.

Here κόσμος is being used to identify an identifiable world-system. In this context John asserts several conclusions about the "world": (1) Christ is not "of" it, (2) believers are not "of" it, but they are "in" it, and (3) the "evil one" is in some way related to it. While this seems to have a connection with the contemporary idea of culture, this system includes the values and orientation that create culture but does not appear to identify culture itself as defined by anthropologists.

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

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

Barket notes that John uses κόσμος here far differently than he did in John 3:16: "Here, however, the world is presented as the evil system totally under the grip of the devil (cf. 1 John 5:19; John 12:31; 14:30). It is the 'godless world' (NEB), the world of 'emptiness and evil,' the world of enmity against God (James 4:4)."[50] Once again, however, this world-system does not appear to be the same thing as what anthropologists call culture. Not all of what mankind produces is godless, empty, or at enmity with God.

The final passage is Romans 12:2. This time the term in question is αἰών, and once again this term is treated negatively:

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

The term appears to be used nearly synonymously here with how John used κόσμος in John 14 and 1 John 2; it describes a world-system to which believers are not to be conformed. But once again, the term appears to signify an ordered system of values alienated from God rather than signifying culture itself. David Wells defines at least one use of the term κόσμος as "the ways in which fallen aspirations are given public expression in any given culture."[51] He argues that when used in this sense, the NT "is speaking of that system of values which takes root in any given culture, the system of values that arises from fallen human nature, and which for that reason marginalizes (pushes to the periphery) God, his truth, and his Christ."[52] He continues:

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[50]Frank E. Gaebelein, gen. ed., *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Volume 12: Hebrews through Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), 321.

[51]David F. Wells, "Marketing the Church: Analysis and Assessment," *Faith and Mission* 12, no. 2 (Spring 1995): 15.

[52]Ibid.

> Worldliness is all in a society that validates the fallenness within us. Worldliness is everything in our culture that makes sin look normal and which makes righteousness look strange and bizarre. Worldliness is that which says it's okay to be self-righteous, self-centered, self-satisfied, self-aggrandizing, and self-promoting. Those things are all okay, our culture says. Then it says that those who pursue self-denial or self-effacement for Christ's sake are stupid. That is worldliness—how life appears from this fallen center within myself, this center which has taken the place of God and of his truth. That, I take it, is what the New Testament has in view when it speaks about worldliness. It is talking about a cultural phenomenon, about the public environment by which we are surrounded, that which validates all that is fallen within us. It is what we encounter in movies, in television, in the workplace, in the people with whom we rub shoulders. We hear it in conversations; we see it in advertisements; it is in the air all the time.[53]

Therefore, assuming the anthropological definition of culture as the entire way of life of a people, the idea of "world" does not directly apply in these cases since "world" is something entirely hostile to God in every case, while certainly not everything a people does is evil.

Terms Related to Behavior

A third category of NT terms that could parallel the contemporary concept of culture relate to behavior, including words most often translated as "behavior, "conduct," or "way of life."

Among these, NT authors most often use ἀναστροφή (*anastrophē*) in this manner. Bullinger defines the word as "life, as made up of actions; mode of life, conduct, deportment."[54] The Apostle Paul uses it to describe his behavior in his previous existence: "For you have heard of my former life [ποτε ἀναστροφήν] in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it" (Gal 1:13). Boice notes of Paul's use of the term here:

> The word Paul used for his former "way of life" (*anastrophē*) is singularly appropriate to the Jewish faith. Judaism was not a mask to be donned or doffed at will, as was the case with so many of the pagan religions. Judaism was a way of life, involving all of life, and Paul is correct in describing it as his exclusive sphere of existence before his conversion.[55]

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[53]Ibid.

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

[55]Frank E. Gaebelein, gen. ed., *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Volume 10: Romans through Galatians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976), 433.

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

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

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

> Paul now gives the content of the teaching his readers received, though the verb is not actually repeated. Their previous life style was to be discarded completely. They must forsake their old behavioral haunts (*anastrophēn*; NIV, "your former way of life") and indeed lay aside the costume of their unregenerate selves.[56]

The most prolific use of ἀναστροφή occurs in Peter's writings. Forms of the term appear three times in 1 Peter 1:13–19:

> Therefore, preparing your minds for action, and being sober-minded, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct [ἀναστροφῇ], since it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy." And if you call on him as Father who judges impartially according to each one's deeds [ἔργον], conduct yourselves [ἀναστράφητε] with fear throughout the time of your exile, knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways [ματαίας ἀναστροφῆς] inherited from your forefa-

[56]Frank E. Gaebelein, gen. ed., *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Volume 11: Ephesians through Philemon* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), 62.

> thers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot.

Like Paul, Peter contrasts a former way of life with that of a new behavior. Howe asserts of Peter's use of ἀναστροφή, "The word 'behavior,' which translates ἀναστροφῆ, corresponds to the word 'lifestyle' and covers all actions, thoughts, words, and relationships."[57] Peter characterizes the former behavior as flowing from ignorance, leading to "futile ways inherited from your forefathers." The new way is to be characterized by holiness and fear. Here Peter uses the verb form of ἀναστροφή, ἀναστρέφω *(anastrephō*), to command his readers to live a certain way since they have been ransomed from the former life. Peter also uses a nearly synonymous "behavior"-related term, ἔργον (*ergon*; "deeds"), to describe their lifestyle.

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

> Each of these four designations is pregnant with suggestiveness of its own, but they all express the important early Christian conviction that Christians in any one place or region belonged to a people, the people of God, which constituted a new corporate presence. This self-consciousness became a significant feature of the remarkable confidence of the Christians in the first three centuries.[58]

Wright argues that the early church saw itself as a "third race," distinct from other earthly races, and thus it rejected the behavior of those races. Christians are a new race, not because they happen to choose a new way of life; rather, they have a new spiritual genetic heritage that produces a distinct conduct.

1 Peter 2:12 also reveals another important aspect of a believer's conduct—it has potential evangelistic impact upon unbelievers: "They may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation." Peter reiterates this emphasis in 1 Peter 3:1-2: "Likewise,

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[57]Frederic R. Howe, "The Christian Life in Peter's Theology," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 157, no. 627 (July 2000): 306–7.

[58]David F. Wright, "A Race Apart? Jews, Gentiles, Christians," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 160, no. 368 (April 2003): 128.

wives, be subject to your own husbands, so that even if some do not obey the word, they may be won without a word by the conduct [ἀναστροφῆς] of their wives, when they see your respectful and pure conduct [ἀναστροφὴν]." Also important to note is that Peter describes this "pure conduct" in terms of particular ways of adorning themselves in jewelry and dress, i.e., "cultural" products (vv 3–6). Finally, Peter further describes the importance of a believer's way of life for its significance in evangelism in 1 Peter 3:15–16:

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

A New Testament Understanding of Culture

This study reveals that the NT terms most closely resembling both cultural anthropologists' and missional authors' definitions of "culture" are those related to behavior. While both the terms related to ethnic identity and those related to "the world" demonstrate relationship to the contemporary notion of culture, they do not identify culture itself. Ethnic groups unite around common culture, and the sinful world-system affects unbelieving culture, but these terms are not the same as culture. Rather, behavior-related terms like ἀναστροφή—which describe complete ways of life, conduct, and behavior—most closely identify "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, arts, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (Tylor)[59] or "the sum total of ways of living built up by a human community and transmitted from one generation to another" (Newbigin).[60]

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

[59]Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, 1.

[60]Newbigin, *The Other Side of 1984*, 5.

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

Third, NT authors demand that the culture of Christians be holy, pure, and distinct from the culture of unbelievers. Rather than understanding culture to be neutral, NT authors judge unbelieving culture as worthy of condemnation. They expect Christians, therefore, to reject the culture shaped by the world's systems and to form a new way of life impacted by biblical values. The culture produced from unbelief is not neutral; it is depraved. As Snoeberger notes, "Cultural neutrality is a myth and culture is hostile toward God; just as man is individually depraved in microcosm, so also culture is corporately depraved in macrocosm."[61]

Fourth, NT authors proclaim Christianity as a new and distinct people group that shares new values and thus new culture. Peter in particular identifies Christians as a "chosen race," a "holy nation," and a "people for [God's] own possession" distinct from other races, nations, and peoples. Howe summarizes the important relationship between terms related to ethnicity behavior in Peter's writing:

> The word ἀναστροφῆς, "way of life," is a key word in Petrine theology, for it occurs eight times in Peter's epistles (1 Pet. 1:15; 18; 2:12; 3:1, 2, 16; 2 Pet. 2:7; 3:11). The contrast of lifestyles of believers before and after they trusted Christ as their Redeemer is vividly displayed by seeing how the same word is used to describe their former way of life ("your futile way of life [ἀναστροφῆς]," 1:18) and their new life in Christ ("be holy yourselves also in all your behavior" [ἀναστροφῇ]," 1:15).
>
> This contrast serves as evidence that Peter sought to relate the theological significance of the death of Christ to the ethical dimension of the lives of those who trusted his finished work for their salvation.[62]

Fifth, NT authors insist that a clear distinction between the culture of believers and unbelievers will have evangelistic impact. Missional authors, however, argue that in order to reach the culture, believers must be incarnate in the culture, that is, they must resemble the culture around them. Unbelievers will be evangelized only as they recognize the presentation of the gospel in their own cultural language. The advocacy of contextualization by missional authors flows directly from their understanding of culture as something entirely involuntary and neutral. Evangelism cannot occur, they argue, without cultural contextualization. In contrast, NT authors insist that only when the culture of believers

[61]Snoeberger, "Noetic Sin, Neutrality, and Contextualization," 357.

[62]Howe, "The Christian Life in Peter's Theology," 194.

changes as a result of transformed values will unbelievers "glorify God on the day of visitation." Snoeberger explains this more biblical approach to evangelizing the culture: "The proper response of the Christian to culture is to expose its depravity, demonstrate that it has illicitly borrowed from the Christian worldview, and show that its adherents cannot live within the implications of their own worldview."[63]

Snoeberger's comments lead to one final conclusion that must be drawn as a result of synthesizing what the NT authors reveal about pagan and Christian culture: where similarities do exist between the behavior of unbelievers and the conduct of believers, such behavior by unbelievers is due to the fact that on that particular issue they are working with what Greg Bahnsen calls "borrowed capital"[64]—unbelievers borrowing biblical values in certain areas of their lives. Snoeberger explains:

> Some cultures borrow substantially from the Christian worldview (sometimes consciously and deliberately, but more often in subconscious response to the latent influence of common grace that envelopes all of God's creation) and others do not, and this factor is singularly vital in determining how a Christian is to relate to culture.[65]

This reality explains why the culture of Christians may at times resemble the culture of unbelievers in some respects. However, this understanding also sets the believer's initial response toward an unbelieving culture as one of suspicion until he can determine which aspects reveal a borrowing from biblical values. Furthermore, when certain aspects of an unbelieving culture and a biblical culture resemble one another, it is because the unbelievers look like Christians in those instances, not the other way around.

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

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[63]Snoeberger, "Noetic Sin, Neutrality, and Contextualization," 357.

[64]"The unbeliever lives on borrow capital; that is, he knows the truth deep down and even secretly assumes it, but he has no right to believe it on his own presuppositions—he must borrow from the Christian worldview" (Greg L. Bahnsen, *Pushing the Antithesis: The Apologetic Methodology of Greg L. Bahnsen* [American Vision, 2007], 103).

[65]Mark A. Snoeberger, "D. A. Carson's Christ and Culture Revisited: A Reflection and a Response," *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 13 (2008): 100.