Scripture, Culture, and missions

Global Choices for Twenty-First Century Christians: Bringing Clarity to Missional Theology

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I have been asked to discuss, from a global perspective, our theological choices in fulfilling the Lord's commission during the twenty-first century. It is incumbent upon a theologian to discern the current state of a conversation as he enters it, identifying its tenor, parties, definitions, etc. A reading of recent contributions to theological missiology, or missional theology, engenders immense respect for the various participants, along with a desire to encourage clarity in the concepts being utilized. This essay engages with that conversation from a taxonomical perspective, dwelling especially upon the role of the recent concept of "culture" and its related terminology. With a genuine appreciation for the current and coming contributions of the new global churches and their theologians, it argues from the perspective that the existing free churches present a finer model for their continuing development than any other extant paradigm. Like the free churches of more recent centuries, the new churches on our globe would do well to discern the Spirit within the voices of other Christians, while avoiding their errors in departing from the Word.

Wilbert R. Shenk began the recent acclaimed volume, *Globalizing Theology*, with this remarkable sentence: "From the human point of view, there is no way we can engage with the gospel independent of culture." He goes on to argue, "We have no choice but to recast knowledge and relationships in light of the processes of modern globalization." Shenk concludes that "to get our bearings in this new situation requires that we let go of what is worn-out and turn to the hard work of discerning new ways of seeing."[1] The editors and contributors to the volume do not depart from this basic claim, although there are degrees of dependency upon the conception of culture within the volume. In a significant borrowing from evangelical theologian David Wells, one of the editors fluently cites then continually treats culture as in some sense, "normative." Indeed, placing the world in tandem with the Word, he goes on to argue, "Doing theology, then, is a multidisciplinary activity requir-

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[1]Wilbert R. Shenk, "Foreword," in *Globalizing Theology: Belief and Practice in an Era of World Christianity*, ed. Craig Ott and Harold A. Netland (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 9-11.

ing us not only to exegete the Word but also to exegete the contemporary world."[2]

An avant-garde evangelical theologian, Kevin Vanhoozer, agrees with this Hegelian placement of culture alongside gospel, which he retitles the "catholic principle" and the "canonical principle." He also concurs with the common criticism that Western missions have been unduly influenced by the propositionalism of evangelical confessionalists. He endorses the movement toward a pastoral and performative theology in "the turn to the context" or "the turn to the cultural context." Although Vanhoozer is careful to retain Scripture as the "primary source" of theology, he grants a very large place to culture as a theological source. It is indefinite whether the divergent materials of the Word and the world will end in a faithful synthesis, in spite of Vanhoozer's warnings about such problems as syncretism.[3]

Discerning the choices before the global churches requires a stable taxonomy, especially in light of the variety of theological ideas used as well as their shifting definitions and indefinite conclusions. There are several important theological terms and ideas employed in contemporary missiological discourse and these require careful delineation if we are to begin arriving at a consensus on the appropriateness of the choices before us. The following six terms will be defined according to the biblical-theological commitments of the free churches: Scripture, Culture, Christ and Culture, Relevance, the Cultural Mandate, and the Great Commission. We shall conclude with a query regarding whether free church engagement may be preferred to evangelicalism's desire for cultural comprehension.

1. Scripture

The Holy Bible was written by men divinely inspired and is God's revelation of Himself to man. It is a perfect treasure of divine instruction. It has God for its author, salvation for its end, and truth, without any mixture of error, for its matter. Therefore, all Scripture is totally true and trustworthy. It reveals the principles by which God judges us, and therefore is, and will remain to the end of the world, the true center of Christian union, and the supreme standard by which all human conduct, creeds, and religious opinions should be tried. All Scripture is a testimony to

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[2]Harold A. Netland, "Introduction," in *Globalizing Theology*, 17.

[3]Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "'One Rule to Rule Them All?' Theological Method in an Era of World Christianity," in *Globalizing Theology*, 85-126. While critical in one place of propositionalism, Vanhoozer elsewhere seems unduly bound to Reformed theology. Idem, *First Theology: God, Scripture & Hermeneutics* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 98-106. For other discussions by Vanhoozer on culture, see *First Theology*, 309-36; idem, "A Drama-of-Redemption Model," in *Four Views on Moving Beyond the Bible to Theology*, ed. Gary T. Meadors (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 151-99.

Christ, who is Himself the focus of divine revelation.[4]

A definition for Scripture, such as this one from the Southern Baptist Convention, is rightly acceptable to most evangelical and free church Christians due to its affirmations of inspiration and inerrancy. However, in missiology as in preaching, there is a dynamic understanding of the Bible that also ought to be taken into account. While describing Scripture as "perfect" and as having "salvation for its end"—both of which indicate divine movement—this statement only partially captures the divine dynamism attested in Scripture. We therefore turn to Scripture itself for a clearer discourse on the nature of Scripture as the living, active Word of God that reaches through proclamation into the hearts of people everywhere.

Rom 10:17 states, "So faith comes from hearing, and hearing from the Word of Christ." The last phrase, *dia rhēmatos Christou*, is a preposition with a genitive of means, which means "by" or "through." "The 'preaching' is the 'word' about Christ, the 'word of faith,' so called because it awakens faith in its hearers."[5] Karl Barth agrees with this evangelical assessment: "For the Word of God is nigh it, and the report which its preachers proclaim must surely proceed from the Word of God. Surely men do discover from the report of the preacher the faithfulness of God, and surely faith and obedience are thereby generated."[6]

Yet other passages support an understanding of Scripture as the searching and sufficient Word of God. Several texts appear to treat the Word of God as subject, fallen humanity as object, and the proclaimer as instrumental. For instance, according to Isa 55:10-11, the Word of God descends from heaven above to accomplish on earth that for which God has sent it. In Rom 10:5-10, which draws upon Deut 30:11-14, the Word of God that is proclaimed comes near to the heart and mouth of the hearer and is ready to be believed internally and confessed externally. 1 Cor 4:6 warns the hearer not to exceed what is written, indicating the sufficiency of Scripture and therefore the necessity of staying close to the text. In Heb 4:12-13, the Word of God—primarily understood as the written Word, but certainly with reference to the empowering divine Word behind the text—searches out and judges the internal man because it is living and active and sharper than any two-edged surgical knife.

The Word of God is thus both dynamic and sufficient to accomplish the divine will. The Word of Christ, the efficient cause, generates personal faith in the hearer. The preacher of the proclaimed Word is merely instrumental, a tool in the hand of the Word become flesh. Unfortunately, however, too many evangelicals treat the Word of God as requiring human aid to

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[4]*The Baptist Faith & Message* (2000), Article I.

[5]F. F. Bruce, *The Letter of Paul to the Romans: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, Revised 1985), 197.

[6]Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, transl. Edwyn C. Hoskyns, 6th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1933), 387.

become effective for salvation, as if the Word of God was not powerful in grace but limited by the cultures of man. Does this not generate an echo of a Pelagian view of preaching? In response, we affirm that the Word is sufficiently powerful, while the preacher is instrumentally dependent. The Word works through the preacher, not because of the preacher.

Does this mean that the preacher may just simply speak the words of the text? Or, that the missionary may not be concerned with translation? The answer to both questions is, of course, no. The Lord's Great Commission implies both translation and extensive discussion in the commands to make disciples "of the nations" and to "teach all that I have commanded" (Matt 28:16-20). However, even as the missionary speaks the Word of God in the languages, and therefore cultural paradigms, of the people, the Word itself is not bound by languages but utilizes human language for its purpose. Indeed, the Word stands in judgment of language even as it enters that language to transcend the limits of a particular culture and introduce the God who is above all cultures. Likewise, while the preacher may employ various cultural paradigms—illustrations, explanations, etc—to reflect upon the biblical text, it is the Word that illuminates itself by the Spirit even while the preacher is continually stumbling towards coherence.

2. Culture

The Etymology of "Culture"

The way in which "culture" is used in the study of Christian mission is actually the seventh and most recent use according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, following the much earlier concept of cultivating crops. This use can be traced back only into the late nineteenth century. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines it as, "The distinctive ideas, customs, social behaviour, products, or way of life of a particular society, people, or period."

Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744-1803) was the first to use "culture" (*Kultur*) and the related term of "cultivation" (*Bildung*) in the sense of the development of a people (*Volk*). *Kultur* is "the life-blood of a people, the flow of moral energy that holds society intact." This use of "culture" has developed into a threefold usage: the common culture of the *Volk*, the high culture of the elite, and the popular culture "founded in choice, taste and leisure."[7] *Bildung* is a complex term indicating the advancement of "culture" through the intentional "education," "cultivation," "development," or "shaping" of the whole human person, especially with regard to intellectual and social skills.

Kultur was subsequently expanded in meaning in the works of the idealist philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831). The way Hegel used *Kultur* was of a self-referential system that requires the person to find truth in that system. Through the dialectic of the idea and of nature,

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[7]Roger Scruton, *An Intelligent Person's Guide to Modern Culture* (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 2000), 1-2.

the *Geist* (Spirit) realizes itself in "self-consciousness."[8] Hegel's relativistic view of culture was mitigated only somewhat through his peculiar view of the *Weltgeist*, or World-spirit, which comes to know itself through the human dialectic of successively higher cultures, ultimately culminating in the fourth and highest self-knowledge of the German world, discovering in itself freedom.[9]

Culture in Theology

Paul Tillich (1886-1965) is the premier theologian of culture, for it was the central concern of his work. For Tillich, theology is primarily apologetic. It is an "answering theology," where the "situation" asks the question and theology provides the answer. He rejects "kerygmatic theology" as only effective "under special psychological conditions, for instance, in revivals." Beyond this, it is impossible, for "theology cannot escape the problem of the 'situation.'" His systematic theology depends on the "method of correlation": "It tries to correlate the questions implied in the situation with the answers implied in the message." Of course, he recognizes this is a theological assertion "made with passion and risk," though he fails here to define the risk.[10]

Tillich appreciated the magnitude of Hegel's system: Hegel's "great synthesis is the turning point for so many of the actual problems of today . . . . So Hegel is in some sense the center and the turning point . . . of a world-historical movement which has directly or indirectly influenced our whole century." Friedrich Schleiermacher, the father of modern theological liberalism, and Hegel "are the points toward which all elements go and from which they then diverge, later bringing about the demand for new syntheses."[11] Tillich goes on to delineate the syntheses of Hegel's thought: God and Man, Religion and Culture, State and Church. Everything is brought into the system and culture stands at the center. For Tillich, "religion is the substance of culture, and culture is the form of religion." Culture, therefore, provides the key to Christian power: "He who can read the style of a culture can discover its ultimate concern, its religious substance." This is the promise that Tillich makes to those who would study culture. The employment of culture and its style is the means to Christian influence.[12]

> The Church has the function of answering the question implied in man's very existence, the question of the meaning of

[8]G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, transl. A. V. Miller (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), §§ 438-43.

[9]Idem, *Philosophy of History*, transl. J. Sibree (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), 151-369.

[10]Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951-1963), 1:6-8.

[11]Paul Tillich, *Perspectives on 19ᵗʰ and 20ᵗʰ Century Protestant Theology*, ed. Carl E. Braaten (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 114-15, 5.

[12]Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, ed. Robert C. Kimball (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), 42.

this existence. One of the ways in which the Church does this is evangelism. The principle of evangelism must be to show to the people outside the church that the symbols in which the life of the Church expresses itself are answers to the questions implied in their very existence as human beings. Because the Christian message is the message of salvation and because salvation means healing, the message of healing in every sense of the word is appropriate to our situation. This is the reason why movements at the fringe of the Church, sectarian and evangelistic movements of a most primitive and unsound character, have such great success. Anxiety and despair about existence itself induces millions of people to look out for any kind of healing that promises success.[13]

In case the evangelical free church Christian is encouraged by Tillich's description, note his next sentence: "The Church cannot take this way." In other words, for the premier theologian of culture, "sectarian and evangelistic movements" are anathema to the Christian concerned with cultural influence. Tillich concludes, "The Church and the culture are within, not alongside each other. And the Kingdom of God includes both while transcending both." In other words, the church and the culture are synthesized to create the Kingdom of God.[14] In effect, the theology of culture simultaneously anathematizes free church evangelism and free church ecclesiology as it baptizes the culture. Tillich does leave a place for the "Church School" to inculcate transcendent truth, but he laments that in his day, Christian education "does not represent the spirit of our society as a whole." Thus, Christians must continue to seek to influence the culture by melding with it to create the Kingdom of God.[15]

Is "Culture" a Scriptural Term?

Part of the difficulty with using the term "culture" is that it does not translate any scriptural term, nor does it fit exactly within any scriptural concept. However, there are at least two near concepts in Scripture: 1) *Ethnos*: a multitude living together; a tribe or nation; specifically, the nations other than Israel, and 2) The various terms for "world" or "age": *aion*, *cosmos*, *oikoumene*. We draw upon both of these near concepts to culture in the following survey.

How then are these near terms used in the Old Testament? Among the prophets, all the nations are under divine judgment due to their sin. In Amos 1-2, the nations of Damascus, Gaza, Tyre, Edom, Ammon, Moab, Judah, and Israel are condemned; in Isaiah 13-23, this judgment extends to Babylon, Assyria, Philistia, Moab, Syria, Israel, Ethiopia, Egypt, Edom,

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[13]Ibid., 49-50.
[14]Ibid., 50-51.
[15]"Basic Considerations," in ibid., 153.

Arabia, Judah, and Tyre. In Jeremiah 46-51: Egypt, Philistia, Moab, Ammon, Edom, Damascus, Kedar, Hazor, Elam, and Babylon join the list of the doomed. Summarizing the prophecies against the nations, Isa 34:2 says, "For the indignation of the Lord is against all nations." Among the prophets, it is quite noticeable that the people of God themselves are also under divine judgment due to their sin. Moreover, among the prophets, all parts of a nation are under divine judgment due to universal sin. In Isa 9:13-17, judgment is due upon the elders, prophets, and princes, as well as the young men, fatherless, and widows: "For everyone is a hypocrite and an evildoer and every mouth speaks folly."

Providentially, among the prophets, all the nations are also invited to a restored relationship with God. Jonah learned the hard way that ethnocentric tendencies are inappropriate for a prophet. Similarly, Isaiah prophesies, "Blessed is Egypt My people, and Assyria the work of My hands, and Israel My inheritance" (19:24), for salvation is also for the Gentiles (chaps. 56, 60). Eschatologically, "'I will gather all nations and tongues; and they shall come and see my glory . . . and I will also take some of them for priests and Levites,' says the Lord" (66:18, 21). Moreover, among the prophets, all individuals within a nation are invited to distinguish themselves over against unrepentant individuals in their nation. Ezekiel 18 repeats versions of this refrain: On the one side, "the soul who sins shall die." On the other side, the repentant son "shall not die for the iniquity of his father. He shall surely live."

Jeremiah also relays some truths regarding the relationship of the proclaimer of the Word and the listening culture. First, the prophet should expect to be unpopular with the nation when relaying some divine messages (20:7-10). Second, the prophet who prophesies cultural affirmations must be tested and live in fear of divine judgment (chap. 28). Third, Jeremiah counseled the people of God how to live in the midst of their own and other nations. The people should "seek the peace of the city" in which God places them (chap. 29). Finally, the people must not disobey God and must avoid seeking safety in the ways of the nations (chap. 42).

There is a fine balance between cultural judgment and cultural engagement within the ministry of Jeremiah and of all the prophets, a balance that extends beyond Israel to the nations. As Walther Eichrodt noted in his magisterial *Theology of the Old Testament*, cultural differences break down in light of the impending judgment: "the distinction between Israel and the heathen becomes almost meaningless as compared with their common liability to the divine retribution that is threatening all mankind."[16] However, this universal judgment is in "paradoxical unity" with a universal hope, which is made a "concrete reality" in "the Gospel of the New Testament based on the Cross and Resurrection of Jesus Christ."[17]

In the New Testament, three principles are detectable. First is a prin-

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[16]Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, vol. 1, transl. J. A. Baker (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961), 470-71.

[17]Ibid., 471.

ciple of evangelical engagement: All the nations are the subjects of intensive evangelism by the people of God (Matt 28:18). Second is a principle that may be characterized as a holy aloofness: As the people of God exist among the nations, they are expected to remain separate from the sinful ways of the nations in this passing world (2 Cor 6:11-7:1; 1 John 2:15, 17). Third is a dualistic principle of allegiance to eternity with temporary residence in time: The people of God are "a holy nation" who currently reside as "resident aliens," living responsibly amidst the nations yet with different, exalted priorities (1 Pet 2:9-12).

Preliminary Theological Implications

Because of the limited correlation of "culture" with the teaching of Scripture, the Christian must exercise care in the use of the term. However, if we take "culture" simply to mean the "thoughts and ways" of the "nations" in the "world," we may discern some theological implications from Scripture. First, by no means is culture a neutral phenomenon. Because culture is a collection of human thoughts and ways, culture is marked not only with divine blessings upon all, but also with universal human depravity. Second, to "immerse" oneself in a culture entails the high risk of embracing the gods (or false ends) of the depraved culture. The cult of idols and the culture of idolaters are intimately intertwined with one another. Syncretism is a constant danger. Third, Scripture seems to call for both evangelistic engagement with and holy separation from the cultures of the nations in which the churches live.

3. Christ and Culture

A Presbyterian Proposal

The terminology of "Christ and Culture" received its definitive form in the work of H. Richard Neibuhr, who delivered a set of lectures at the Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary in 1949.[18] The resulting book has shaped the theological discussion ever since. Neibuhr's paradigm of "Christ Against Culture," "The Christ of Culture," "Christ Above Culture," "Christ and Culture in Paradox," and "Christ the Transformer of Culture," as well as his preference for the last option, are widely recognized and need not be detailed here.

A Free Church Response

Craig Carter, in *Rethinking Christ and Culture*, has provided a helpful critique of Niebuhr's paradigm: First, it is interesting that both liberals and evangelicals agree with the Niebuhr paradigm. Second, the paradigm "is based on a very large, general background assumption: the theory of Christendom, which is taken for granted by both author and readers." "Chris-

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[18]H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1951).

tendom" is defined as "the assertion that Western civilization is Christian." Third, from Carter's perspective, "building and sustaining Christendom requires activity incompatible with being a follower of Jesus Christ."[19]

Niebuhr dismissed the Anabaptist challenge to Christendom and affirmed the "Christ the Transformer of Culture" style of Christendom. However, Carter, in a parallel argument to the "holy aloofness" noted above, argues that the Christian community "is necessarily against culture in many ways, but the kind of all-or-nothing choice demanded by Niebuhr in *Christ and Culture* is a false dichotomy."[20] Carter also notes that "once one rejects the Christendom assumptions behind Niebuhr's book, the whole typology becomes suspect."[21] Carter draws deeply on the work of the Anabaptist historian and free church theologian John Howard Yoder (1927-1997) in order to construct his critique. According to Yoder himself, there are many types of Constantinianism (historical Christendom), but they all share these assumptions:[22] First, God works primarily through the culture rather than the church, effectively placing Constantinianism in opposition to biblical ecclesiology. Second, the church thus finds its relevance in the culture, so that a "secular revelation" of an overarching "truth" is believed to come through the power of, for instance, the Roman emperor. Thereby, Constantinianism becomes a challenge to biblical revelation. Third, the Constantinian paradigm argues, "It is the business of the church to identify with 'our side,' with the good guys." In short, this means identifying the church with whatever power is in control or on the rise. The third challenge of Constantinianism is, therefore, its undermining of a biblical political theology.

According to Yoder, however, these three are not the only problems. There is, fourth, "the progressive abandonment of the vision of catholicity." Constantine did not rule the entire world, for Christians existed outside the empire in large numbers and large numbers of Christians in the empire refused the state-church (e.g., Donatists). Moreover, as Constantinianism entered new forms with the Roman Catholic church and the Reformation state-churches, the definition of the true church was increasingly restricted. In other words, Constantinianism presents a challenge to the communion of saints. Fifth, with the correlation of church and state in the Christendom system, "At each level the capacity of the church as a body to be critical of internal injustice shrivels as well." In other words, the state church loses its prophetic voice, because it is part of the ruling class, allowing Constantinianism to pose a challenge to integrity in proclamation.

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[19]Craig A. Carter, *Rethinking Christ and Culture: A Post-Christendom Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2006), 13-17.

[20]Ibid., 25.

[21]Ibid., 17.

[22]This section interacts with Yoder, "Christ, the Hope of the World," in *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiological and Ecumenical*, ed. Michael G. Cartwright (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1998), 192-218.

A Baptist Free Church Response

So far, this free church theologian would agree with the responses of Yoder and Carter to the Christendom/Constantinianism model of Tillich and Niebuhr. However, there are three ways in which I would expand their critique, as well as one major disagreement and one minor disagreement that should be mentioned.

Three further critiques of Christendom may be registered beyond those so far delineated by Yoder. First, because of Christendom's dependence upon infant baptism as an assurance of culture-wide Christianity, Christendom predisposes lost people against hearing the witness of the Christian evangelist. Constantinianism, in other words, presents a direct challenge to biblical baptism. Our second additional critique concerns the church's energies. The attention of the churches, according to the free church understanding should be directed toward evangelism through proclamation of the gospel. Unfortunately, in the pursuit of Christian cultural hegemony, these are siphoned off into pursuing secondary and tertiary matters. Rather than speaking the Word of God, Christians become legislators and judges of culture who act like full citizens rather than resident aliens. This is a severe challenge to the New Testament focus upon the biblical means of grace. Third and finally, in Christendom, the church has declared "holy" that which God has not and often that which God has declared "unholy." The magistrate begins to take on sacred properties, so that the goals of a human system realized through the human coercion of human faith comes to be seen as normal. Cultural comprehension as the goal of conversion results in the perversion of the means of grace, the violence of human faith, and the denial of human voluntariness. This final critique means that Constantinianism presents a severe challenge to biblical holiness. Indeed, Yoder would go so far as to describe the Christendom system as "not merely a possible tactical error but a structured denial of the gospel."[23] The error of Christendom "was not that it propagated Christianity around the world but that what it propagated was not Christian enough."[24] Yoder's negative critique of Constantinianism or Christendom is powerful and necessary. However, where I would part ways with Yoder is in his positive proposal. On the one hand, Yoder is probably correct when he argues, "The Christian church has been more successful in contributing to the development of society and to human well-being precisely when it has avoided alliances with the dominant political or cultural powers." Much more should be said in this regard.

On the other hand, Yoder seems to fall into the same trap as Niebuhr in placing "culture" in a synthetic relation with the Lord Jesus Christ. The very language of "Christ and culture" elevates culture unduly as a concept, placing culture at eye level rather than as a subsidiary matter. Caught in this way of thinking, even as he seeks to avoid it, Yoder writes, "Instead of asking,

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[23]Idem, "The Disavowal of Constantine," in ibid., 245.
[24]Ibid., 257.

'What is God doing in the world?' the church should ask, 'How can we distinguish, in the midst of all the things that are going on in the world, where and how God is at work?'"[25]

Instead of focusing on the ways of general revelation, I would argue for a focus on special revelation. Our question should not be about the general ways of God in the world, but on the specific way that we should witness to the biblical gospel in this limited and fallible world. Instead, our question should be, "Where would God have me proclaim His Word?" Thus, I would argue that the paradigm of "Christ and Culture" is conceivably inappropriate for Baptists at a fundamental level. This is because of the necessary presence of the Word in our work. Moreover, it is because we affirm heartily the holy and peculiar nature of the church vis-à-vis culture, not to mention the separation of church and state. Finally, it is because the means of our warfare are spiritual rather than physical. Baptists have, historically, seen the problem of culture as, quite literally, a problem. The following paragraph from *The Baptist Faith and Message* summarizes that view. Notice how each use of "culture" and "age" entails discernment as well as judgment, implicitly recognizing that "world" is the proper near term to "culture."

> New challenges to faith appear in every age. A pervasive anti-supernaturalism in the culture was answered by Southern Baptists in 1925, when the Baptist Faith and Message was first adopted by this Convention. In 1963, Southern Baptists responded to assaults upon the authority and truthfulness of the Bible by adopting revisions to the Baptist Faith and Message. The Convention added an article on 'The Family' in 1998, thus answering cultural confusion with the clear teachings of Scripture. Now, faced with a culture hostile to the very notion of truth, this generation of Baptists must claim anew the eternal truths of the Christian faith.[26]

4. Relevance

A term that is increasingly used in popular missionary discourse is that of "relevance" or making "relevant." According to the *Oxford Shorter English Dictionary*, "relevant" means, "1. Legally pertinent or sufficient. 2. Bearing on, connected with, or pertinent to the matter in hand." In other words, relevance indicates the sufficiency and importance of something to the contemporary age. One hundred years ago, the eleventh edition (a rather famous one) of the *Encylopaedia Brittanica* was published. A full-page ad in the *New York Times* proclaimed the eleventh edition was "the sum of human knowledge—all that mankind has thought, done or achieved, all of the past

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[25]Idem, "Christ, the Hope of the World," in ibid., 203.
[26]*Baptist Faith and Message* (2000), Preface.

experience of humanity that has survived the trial of time and the ordeal of service and is preserved as the useful knowledge of today." The 29-volume set was touted as sufficient for mankind's needs: "all is included that is relevant and everything explained that is explainable."[27] Apparently, relevance is an ephemeral (very temporary) phenomenon, visibly indicated by the fact that the *Encyclopaedia Brittanica* has been supplanted with other, especially online encyclopedias. But is contemporaneousness enough to define what is truly relevant? We think not.

What about synchronizing with the culture? Since "relevance" is defined by the contemporary nature of a matter to the culture, should Christians, therefore, be concerned to "immerse" themselves in culture? Such has been the import of Mark Driscoll's call for "cultural immersion" and the "missional life,"[28] as well as Kevin Vanhoozer's previously mentioned affirmation of the "turn to the cultural context" and the need for "cultural exegesis." Such is the result of the seminal work of David J. Bosch in the thought of the missional movement. Bosch argues for mission and its theology to be transformed by a concern for mission above everything. The mission is so important that the idea of the church's holiness, or "what distinguished them," inappropriately distracted the early church. It is rarely noticed that Bosch's work utilizes the historical-critical method and postmodern paradigms of interpretation in order to undermine traditional missiology. In other words, Bosch's project to transform mission depends upon the downplaying of Scripture's calls to live uniquely in the world, which cannot be downplayed without a concomitant deflation of the biblical text.[29]

A Faithful German Critique

Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945) faced the question of relevance and its appropriate definition with his life as well as his theology. Unlike Til- lich, Bonhoeffer refused to stay in America for the duration of the war and returned to Germany to face life with his people, even as he maintained his criticism of Hitler's National Socialist regime. Fairly early in his ministry, Bonhoeffer recognized the need to speak to the culture in ways the world understood. According to the German martyr, this means speaking in con- crete terms to the present time: "The word the church speaks to the world must . . . from a profound knowledge of the world, be relevant to its present reality, if it would resound with full authority . . . otherwise it will be saying something else, a human word, a powerless word."[30] Thus, the concept of

[27]Carol Zaleski, "Faith Matters: The Great EB," *Christian Century* (5 Apr 2011).

[28]Mark Driscoll, "The Need for Cultural Immersion," available through Desiring God Ministries at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RLbpDV7gmV8 (Internet, accessed 1 October 2012); Driscoll and Gerry Breshears, *Vintage Church: Timeless Truths and Timely Methods* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 16-20.

[29]David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 20-24, 28-29, 50.

[30]This and the immediately following quotations by Bonhoeffer are taken from speeches in Czechoslovakia and Switzerland, in *DBW*, 11, 332-53, transl. in Ferdinand

relevance has a very positive role in the transmission of the gospel. On the other hand, if the church's word is to be relevant, it must also be prepared to discern and to rebuke the infiltration of evil into culture and church. In 1932, unusually early in the context of the German Protestant churches, Bonhoeffer warned, "Nazism is also penetrating into the church. Responsible theologians are faced . . . with the task of strengthening those Germans and Christians in Germany who are struggling against Hitler." Bonhoeffer's argument for relevance was tempered by the need to define clearly the church's overall relation to the culture.

Bonhoeffer's words stand in stark contrast to the enthusiastic affirmation of National Socialism by the "German Christians," who declared in 1932, "We want a Protestant church rooted in our own culture."[31] Their desire echoed the promise of Adolf Hitler, who claimed the individual and communal relevance of Christianity: "He was absolutely convinced that neither personal life nor the state could be built up without Christianity."[32] Hitler said he only wanted to "to help the church forward, as it had to a large degree lost touch with the masses of the people."[33] Not only Protestants, but Catholic Youth, too, received Hitler's promises enthusiastically, hailing "the National Socialist revolution as the great spiritual breakthrough of our time. [For] only the powerful National Socialist state, rising out of the Revolution can bring about for us the re-Christianisation of our culture."[34] As the years progressed, a few Christians, in the Roman and Protestant churches as well as in the free churches, began to recognize the need to separate themselves from the Nazi effort to coopt the churches for its own diabolic purposes.

What was it in Bonhoeffer's theology that prepared him to see what so many others could not? He responded with his own question: "What church can speak in such a way? Only a church which proclaims the pure truth of the Gospel. . . . But wherever the church recognizes its guilt with regard to the truth, and wherever the church is nevertheless called by God's command to speak, there the church must dare to speak, solely in faith that its sins are forgiven." For Bonhoeffer, speaking the relevant word to the world required hearing the Word "against us," demanding repentance. The relevant Word against us exists alongside the relevant Word for us, offering forgiveness. Unfortunately, too many only want to hear the Word for us. Bonhoeffer lamented, "Hasn't it become shockingly clear, in everything we have talked about with one another here, that we are no longer obedient to the Bible? We like our own ideas better than those of the Bible. We are no longer reading the Bible seriously; we are no longer reading it against ourselves, but only in

Schlingensiepen, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer 1906-1945: Martyr, Thinker, Man of Resistance*, transl. Isabel Best (New York: T&T Clark, 2010), 90.

[31]"Guiding Principles of the 'German Christians', 26 May 1932," in *The Third Reich and the Christian Churches*, ed. Peter Matheson (Edinburgh, T&T Clark, 1981), 6.

[32]"Roman Catholic Conference in Berlin, 25-26 April 1933," in ibid., 20.

[33]"Hitler Receives the Protestant Church Leaders, 25 January 1934," in ibid., 42.

[34]"Catholic Students Union on National Socialism, 15 July 1933," in ibid., 26.

our favour."[35]

Bonhoeffer, like Karl Barth shortly beforehand, had recently discovered "The Strange New World Within the Bible,"[36] and it had helped him, as it had helped Barth, to reject the Protestant Liberalism that compromised with the culture and the Protestant Fundamentalism that lacked intellectual seriousness. The Word objectively stood above and judged all cultures and all inhabitants. The Word of God is living and active and sufficient to judge and redeem, but it must be heard and heard "against us" as well as for us. The Word that is not heard as judgment and does not transform the hearer is simply not the Word of salvation. In a series of letters to friends, Bonhoeffer described the change fostered during a year of study in New York: "For the first time I discovered the Bible [which] I had often preached . . . but I had not yet become a Christian. . . . Then the Bible freed me from that, in particular the Sermon on the Mount. Since then everything has changed." Bonhoeffer was transformed through the challenging preaching of a French pacifist and of an African-American Baptist Church.[37]

Over against Bonhoeffer, who was both willing to stand against his own culture and hear the Word of God through other cultures, are the German Christians, who were only too willing to immerse themselves in the pagan culture. The German Christians advocated the church should *gleichschalten*, "synchronize" or "coordinate," with the movement of the spirit in German culture by adopting the Führer principle and the Aryan paragraph.[38] This effort to "readjust" the church "to the values of a Germanic Christianity" resulted in such gross efforts as bringing the church further under the hierarchy of the state, liberating the church from the Old Testament "with its Jewish recompense ethic" as well as major portions of the New Testament, and exorcising the doctrine of original sin.[39]

Such efforts eventually brought some within the Protestant and Catholic churches to their senses, as seen in the heroic confession of the Barmen Synod. In article one of the Barmen Declaration, they reasserted their entire dependence upon the Word of God, and in subsequent articles, uncannily paralleling Yoder's critique of Christendom, they reasserted their submission to Jesus Christ as Lord of His church, to separation from the ideological commitments of the world, to the independence of the church from the state, and to the concrete priority of the gospel of Jesus Christ.[40] Unfortunately, Bonhoeffer himself was unable to lead the Confessing Church out of the hands of the state completely, because, in spite of his call for true discipleship, both he and the Confessing Christians were still trapped in the

[35]Schlingensiepen, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 92.

[36]Karl Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, transl. Douglas Horton (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1978), 28-50.

[37]Schlingensiepen, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 95.

[38]Ibid., 124.

[39]"The 'Sports Palace Scandal', 13 November 1933," and "Protest of the Provisional Leadership to Hitler, 28 May 1936," in *The Third Reich and the Christian Churches*, 39-40, 59.

[40]"The Barmen Synod, 29-31 May 1934," in ibid., 45-47.

intellectual paradigm of Christendom.[41] Hitler had used the Constantinian desire for cultural comprehension skillfully in his relations with the Protestant and Roman churches.

Today, some evangelicals have adopted a combination of a Hegelian understanding of culture, as self-enclosed reality without reference to a transcendent God, with a postmodern understanding of culture, as self-enclosed linguistic discourse that is hostile towards a metanarrative. The result is the idea that relevance is determined by the culture and the Word of God has to be "made relevant" in order to impact the culture, as if it were limited and weak, except for the power of those within the culture. This understanding contradicts the idea that the Word of God is both above culture and moves into the culture. Transcendence, judgment, and grace are thereby compromised. The proper response is to emphasize the gracious, living, and powerful nature of the Word. The living Word of God, not the culture of fallen man, ultimately defines what is relevant!

5. The Cultural Mandate

A Presbyterian Proposal

Calvinist theologians have invented a theological concept that serves as a rival to the Great Commission, on the side of creation rather than redemption, but which demands the full attention of the church in its mission. According to Genesis 1:26-28, God made man and commanded them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over . . . every living thing that moves upon the earth." Cornelius Plantinga Jr., standing within the Reformed tradition, argues that the command to have dominion is more than stewardship of nature: "But God's creation extends beyond the biophysical sphere to include a vast array of cultural possibilities that God folded into human nature." This is the so-called "cultural mandate," and it entails dominion over "an array of cultural gifts, such as marriage, family, art, language, commerce, and (even in an ideal world) government." For Plantinga and the Reformed, the church's role includes not only "care for earth and animals . . . but also with developing certain cultural possibilities ('filling' out what is only potentially there)." Indeed, the church must realize that "all" of creation is "potentially redeemable."[42]

An Immediate Baptist Free Church Response

My immediate response is that the "redemption" or "transformation" of culture is a Christendom idea still looking for a scriptural basis, rather unsuccessfully. The concept depends upon a this-world eschatology that assumes

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[41]Bonhoeffer later intimated in his prison letters a shift in fundamental thought toward "religionless Christianity," but we possess too little to know exactly where he was headed.

[42]Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., *Engaging God's World: A Christian Vision of Faith, Learning, and Living* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 29-35.

man is the cause of the coming of the Kingdom of God, a type of eschatol-
ogy conducive to certain untenable brands of amillennialism and postmillen-
nialism. However, the concept has generated a plethora of evangelical efforts
to define the cultural mandate and how the church can bring it about. This
is true for liberal evangelicals,[43] for missional theologians,[44] and for emergent
evangelicals,[45] as well as for conservative evangelicals, such as Plantinga.

6. The Great Commission

The terminology of the "Great Commission" arose in the late sixteenth
century and was popularized by the late seventeenth-century Baptist theolo-
gian, Benjamin Keach, whence it entered the modern vocabulary. The Great
Commission is typically identified with Matt 28:18-20. The Great Com-
mission does not have equivalent parallels in the other gospels. However,
comparison should be made to Mark 16:15-16, Luke 24:45-49, and John
20:21-23. The Great Commission has a single command with multiple and
orderly responsibilties: Go, Make Disciples, Baptize, and Teach.[46] In Acts
1:8, we are given further detail about the church's method of fulfilling the
commission. This commission to the world begins locally in Jerusalem and
spreads through the region to the entire world.

The making of disciples is described in Romans 10 as the result of the
proclamation of the Word of God, which comes to the hearer and is ready
to empower a response in heart and mouth. Again, Rom 10:17 presents faith
as coming through hearing and hearing by means of the Word of God. The
means is the Word; the instrument is the preacher; the recipient is the hearer.
The means of grace for salvation among the lost, according to Scripture, is
the proclamation of the Word of God. There is no other means given to the
church to bring salvation to the world.

The Choices Before Global Christians in the Twenty-First Century

Two choices present themselves to the churches regarding their fulfill-
ment of the Great Commission. First, in a recent volume lauded by young
Reformed leaders, Peter J. Leithart argues that the Constantinian "'merger'
of faith and empire seems to have been a most effective evangelistic method
during the fourth and fifth centuries." Although he admits that the church's
capture of the culture may not be the way forward right now, the use of
government to spread the Christian faith through a new Constantine should

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[43]Philip Clayton, *Transforming Christian Theology for Church and Society* (Minneapolis:
Fortress Press, 2010).

[44]Bosch, *Transforming Mission.*

[45]Mark Driscoll, *The Radical Reformission: Reaching Out without Selling Out* (Grand
Rapids: Zondervan, 2004).

[46]For a fuller treatment of this text, exegetically, historically, and systematically, see
Malcolm B. Yarnell III, *The Heart of a Baptist* (Fort Worth, TX: Center for Theological
Research, 2005).

remain an available option.[47] The second option is to recognize the folly of Christendom and offer a more biblical solution, which we believe to be most clearly revealed at the current time in the best thought of the free churches.

The Folly of Christendom

Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855), one of the most trenchant critics of "Christendom,"[48] noted the illusory nature of focusing upon transforming this transitory world rather than depending radically upon the eternal ways of God in faith. Kierkegaard develops this argument through reminding us of priorities: the priority of eternity to the temporal, the priority of individual faith over human system, and the priority of New Testament discipleship over cultural compromise (Christendom). A review of Kierkegaard's critique helps establish the folly of Christendom.

First, with regard to the priority of the eternal over the temporal, while expositing James 4:8, Kierkegaard argued that purity of heart requires willing one thing. To will for anything other than God is to will a changing thing, which is to will many things. This is described in Scripture as the willing of a double-minded man. "[T]here is a wisdom which is not from above, but is earthly and fleshly and devilish." That fallen "wisdom" calls the man to will the temporary rather than the eternal. In contrast, Kierkegaard says, "Each one who in truth would will one thing must be led to will the Good [i.e. God]."[49]

Second, with regard to the priority of individual faith over human system, while expositing Genesis 22, Kierkegaard argued that God requires man to reach above this world to Him in faith. The problem with Hegelian philosophy is that it places the outer higher than the inner. The Danish philosopher sees a different way forward, placing the human system below the personal encounter with the divine. "Faith, on the contrary, is this paradox, that interiority is higher than exteriority" (Cf. Heb 11:1, which states, "Faith is the conviction of things not seen.") Moreover, "It is God who demands absolute love." As a result, He may call us to act contrary to cultural expectations. (Cf. Luke 14, which states, "If anyone comes to me, and hates not his own father.")[50]

Third, Kierkegaard addresses the priority of New Testament discipleship over cultural compromise (Christendom): "What Christianity wants

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[47]Peter J. Leithart, *Defending Constantine: The Twilight of an Empire and the Dawn of Christendom* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 289-90, 297. Cf. Andrew Walker, "Saving Constantine," *The City* 4.1 (Spring 2011): 84-87; and Trevin Wax, "The Vindication of Constantine," *Christianity Today* (March 2011).

[48]For the ninth century provenance of the term "Christendom" as a descriptor of Christian hegemony, see Diarmaid MacCulloch, *A History of Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years* (New York: Allen Lane, 2009), 503.

[49]Søren Kierkegaard, *Purity of Heart Is to Will One Thing: Spiritual Preparation for the Office of Confession*, transl. Douglas V. Steere (New York: Harper & Row, 1938), ch. 3.

[50]See Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling: Dialectic Lyric by Johannes de Silentio*, transl. Alastair Hannay (New York: Penguin, Revised 2003), Problema II.

is . . . the following of Christ." "What man does not want is suffering, least of all the kind of suffering which is properly the Christian sort, suffering at the hands of men. So he dispenses with 'following,' and consequently with suffering." "Is not 'Christendom' the most colossal attempt at serving God, not by following Christ, as He required. . . . [I]n comparison with the Christianity of the New Testament, it is playing Christianity." "The interest of Christianity, what it wants, is—true Christians. The egoism of the priesthood, both for pecuniary advantage and for the sake of power, stands in relation to—many Christians."

New Testament Christianity does not appeal to the natural man, while counterfeit Christianity appeals to his carnal pleasures, offering "nauseating syrupy sweets." "Our Christianity therefore, the Christianity of 'Christendom,' takes this into account; it takes away from Christianity the offense, the paradox, etc., and instead of that introduces probability, the plainly comprehensible. That is, it transforms Christianity into something entirely different from what it is in the New Testament, yea, into exactly the opposite; and this is the Christianity of 'Christendom,' of us men." "The result of the Christianity of 'Christendom' is that everything, absolutely everything, has remained as it was, only everything has assumed the name of 'Christian'—and so we live a life of paganism."[51]

We conclude Kierkegaard's searing critique of Christendom's focus upon the temporal, the human system, and the culture with a parable written in 1845: "You are standing as if on the summit of the mount of Transfiguration and must depart—but then all the little demands of finitude and the petty debts owed the green-grocer, the shoemaker, and the tailor take hold of you and the final result is that you remain earthbound and you are not transfigured, but the Mount of the Transfiguration is transfigured and becomes a dunghill."[52] Christendom replaces Christ's promise of an encounter with God on the Mount of the Transfiguration with a human dunghill.

The Free Church Solution

If the folly of Christendom disqualifies it as a serious option for global Christians in the twenty-first century, a second option that presents itself is that of the baptizing free churches. This is the way of engaging the world through biblical means (evangelism) according to biblical life together (ecclesiology). This way brings many benefits. Among these are the freedom and Biblicism of the free churches' ecclesiology. The regenerate church seeks congregational faithfulness to the Lord, living holy lives in the midst of a fallen culture. In the free church paradigm, there is a greater opportunity, though not ensured, that holiness may be preserved. The truly regenerate church

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[51]Søren Kierkegaard, *Attack upon "Christendom" 1854-1855*, transl. Walter Lowrie (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, Revised 1968), 121-123, 147, 150-51, 158, 162-64.

[52]Joakim Garff, *Søren Kierkegaard: A Biography*, transl. Bruce H. Kirmmse (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 473.

should remind her members of the need for separation from the wicked-ness of the world. Meanwhile, perhaps paradoxically from the Christendom perspective, missional engagement with the world is preserved in the free church model. The regenerate church recognizes that it must "seek the peace of the city" in which it resides as a "resident alien."

This brings us to the second major benefit of the free church solution: its emphasis upon a Word-oriented evangelism. The free church understands that it must engage lost people honorably in a perishing world through the proclamation of the Word of God. In the free church solution, Scripture is the first to be honored. The Bible is recognized as the means by which the Spirit of God brings faith and thus the means by which evangelism is to occur. In the free church solution of missionary outreach, there is also an attractive empathy for humanity. It recognizes that the Spirit lays the groundwork for proclamation of the Word through means of the mind (e.g., rationalism, apologetics) and the heart (e.g., art, music, emotional events). Moreover, in perhaps the strongest undermining of the structure of Con-stantinianism or Christendom, baptism is reserved for the redeemed, ensur-ing respect for the freedom of humanity and denying any coercion of the human will. The future of the global churches will be better served through attention to the legacy of the free churches, with their Christ-honoring and world-discerning ecclesiology alongside their Word-honoring and human-empathetic evangelism, rather than through the illusory promises, structures, and means of Christendom.