Theology and Culture: *How the Infinite Became a Finite Fact*[1]

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How could the Eternal do a temporal act,
The Infinite become a finite fact?
Nothing can save us that is possible.

«For the Time Being,» W. H. Auden

As we reflect on positive engagement with culture, we must provide some ground for doing so. This paper is intended as a modest attempt to provide a brief sketch of a biblical-theological approach to culture. The bulk of this paper will be devoted to exploring some scriptural motifs that the author hopes will illuminate the discussion. The conclusions we draw from this brief treatment will serve as a basis for our subsequent reflections on the relationship between theology and culture.

It is part of the premise of this paper that the classical distinctions between «general» revelation and «special» revelation do, in fact, have a biblical justification. While God's revelation of Himself and His redemptive purposes are most fully realized in the «particular,» such revelation presupposes the prior general revelation that provides the conceptual resources for it and thus makes possible its articulation. It is the conviction of this author that these theological categories provide a meaningful way to understand the character of God's self-revelation, as well as the way in which this revela-

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tion is received in history. In turn, a more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon of revelation and its reception provides a potentially fruitful way to understand the task of theology.

Creation-Wisdom Theology

The first motif, both chronologically and logically, is creation itself. The opening chapter of Genesis introduces the reader to God's radical ordering activity. He takes Chaos and gives it form, purpose, generativity, and beauty. That creation is located at the beginning of the Torah is hardly accidental, as it serves as the justification for Yahweh's ordering claims in the Law over the lives of the Israelites.

That the order built into nature is accessible to those outside of the covenant as well is evident in the Wisdom Literature that is rooted in creation theology.[2] Since this is an order rooted in creation itself, it is open to general experience. The regularity and relative coherence of «lived experience» makes it amenable to generalization. These generalizations that seek to capture the particular ordering of God yield ethical insights, as it is observed that there are certain patterns of living that bring prosperity and other patterns that bring calamity.

The creation-Wisdom connection is most forcefully evoked in the OT in Pr 8:22-31 (cf. Sir 24; WS 7:22-9:18). Here personified Wisdom attests to her presence with Yahweh at the time of creation, serving as a «master workman» effecting the divine decree. Thus, those who seek blessing have only to embrace Wisdom, whose stamp is indelibly marked on the world.

Israel's wisdom literature is part of a wider set of wisdom traditions in the ANE. It participates in this tradition, likely borrowing as well as making its own contributions. Drawing on experience, wisdom literature distinguishes itself from other OT literature in the relative absence of the covenantal framework: promise to Abraham, Exodus, etc.[3] This, of course, is easily enough explained by its orientation to the creation ordering. It also must not be exaggerated, since for the Israelites the beginning of all wisdom is the fear of Yahweh (Pr 1:7), the covenant God, who is, after all, the creator of the order observed in the world.

This motif, of course, finds its fullest expression in the *logos* teaching of Jn 1, as we will see. Here we merely need to stress that the fact of God's imprint means that, despite its depravity, we live in a world where God's presence is inescapable. Any human attempts to find meaning in this world will be a striving after God's order. Even

[2] For a summary of the recent scholarly consensus concerning the character of wisdom literature which I largely follow here, see Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 680 ff. Cf. also Roland E. Murphy, «Wisdom in the OT» *The Anchor Bible Dictionary,* vol. 6, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 924-26.

[3] Cf. Murphy, 921-22.

flawed attempts will inevitably enjoy some measure of success. What this means is that where the gospel has not been directly encountered, human language and institutions still bear traces of the divine imprint.

Humanity as Image of God: The Cultural Mandate

God's work of careful ordering is to be imitated by humanity, as we discover in the so-called «cultural mandate» of Ge 1:28. Here the call to master the earth is addressed to the primal community: male and female. God's ordering of the world is to continue through the presence and work of human vice-regents. It is first manifest in the most basic community, the family, and then by logical extension applies to broader human communities: tribes, city-states, and later monarchies.

The ordering presumably extends to the various aspects of human existence (political, religious, economic, social), as history bears out. This belies any of the modern theories of the state of nature that envision the isolated individual as the starting point, be they the brute of Hobbes or the romantic savage of Rousseau. We are by nature social creatures who seek to carve order out of the raw material we have been given. In short, we are inherently culture-generating beings.

We catch a further glimpse of this in Ge 2 with the call to care for the earth, and then with Adam's naming of the animals. Here we see the man engaged in the ordering of the world in which he lives. It is important to note that while the Fall reintroduces the threat of Chaos, we nevertheless witness humans pressing on in the quest for meaning and order, observed in the emergence of the city, the arts, technology, and worship in Ge 4:16-26. Although the narrative in no way masks the destructive presence of sin, it also seems to illustrate in a positive sense human beings carrying out God's initial commission to be stewards of creation (Ge1:28; 2:15; 3:23).

The negative dimension of culture is present here as well. Culture, a part of what it means to be human, now threatens to be a means by which humanity asserts its autonomy, creating an order that excludes God. This is the lesson of the Tower of Babel where common action leads to just such an assertion (Ge11:4). If culture was meant to unite people and to be ordered around the worship of God, its abuse at Babel leads to God's multiplication of cultures (Ge 11:7-9). It is this multiplication which necessitates that the gospel be incarnated afresh in each new cultural setting.

Humans in their God-likeness inescapably try to make meaning out of the world that is given to them. While in the sin-diseased world this often leads to great perversions, depravity itself does not eradicate the true, the good, and the beautiful in the world.

It is not accidental that at the conclusion of sin-marred Ge 4 we have the account of Seth. It is from Seth's line that redemption will eventually

come. This is anticipated in Ge 4:26 which associates the restoration of worship with Seth's son Enosh. This hope is accentuated in Ge 5:1-3 where we encounter again the «image of God» language of Ge 1 recounted in relation to Adam and Eve in vv. 1-2 and extended directly to Seth in v. 3. That Seth is singled out points to the enduring theological tension between God's «general» and «special» revelation. The activity of Ge 4 shows humanity «imaging» God, but it is the line of Seth that holds out promise for a fuller revelation and concomitantly a redeemed creation.

A Covenant People

While human culture as such reflects the original divine ordering, sinful distortion leads Yahweh to seek out a particular people who would reflect His ordering in a particular way. It is through covenant relationship with Israel that Yahweh seeks to fully re-establish His reign on earth, with Israel serving as the mediator of this reign. In this act of election, Yahweh sets one culture apart from all others and its religious, political, social, and economic dimensions are governed by the Law given to this people. The privilege belonging to one culture will be important when we discuss the church «as» culture.

It is important, though, to see that even in granting this privilege, God is not creating a new culture out of a vacuum. It is widely acknowledged that Yahweh's relationship with Israel is governed by a covenant system that reflects the suzerain-vassal covenant arrangements of the ANE. The various law collections in the Pentateuch are also reflective of ANE legal traditions that stretch back to the third or early second millennia B.C., i.e. to a time that antedates Moses by several centuries.[4]

What distinguishes Israelite Law from that of its neighbors is its location in the context of Yahweh's covenant with Israel. The Law is seen not as merely a means for political order, but is depicted as coming directly from God. Thus, to disobey the Law is to disobey God Himself. The Law reflects God's own ordering of affairs that we earlier witnessed in the creation narratives. That it is revelatory of Yahweh is confirmed by the juxtaposition of the theophany of Ex 19 with the lawgiving of Ex 20.

It is significant, of course, that this revelatory function of the Law must be accorded with the fact that the prescriptions of the Law are in no way new. God reveals Himself not through creating a new culture *ex nihilo,* but through appropriating cultural traditions and placing them within the covenant context. This type of appropriation in effect alters the meaning of the laws, as the covenant and God's gracious initia-

[4] Samuel Greengus, «Law: Biblical and ANE LAW,» *The Anchor Bible Dictionary,* vol. 4, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992); David Noel Freedman, «Law,» 242-43. See also M.J. Selman, «Law,» *Dictionary of the Old Testament Pentateuch*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 505-07.

tive toward Israel become the defining context for understanding the Law. This is important as we consider the interaction of the gospel with culture, since in order to be communicated, the gospel must necessarily adopt existing symbol systems. However, to do so does not restrict the gospel to prior meanings. By offering a new «context», or horizon, these symbols take on new meanings.

The purpose of the Law is for Israel to mediate God's reign to the rest of the world. The giving of the Law at Mount Sinai marks the reappearance of the divine Word to again bring order out of Chaos, to endow the Israelites with a form, purpose, generativity, and beauty that would attract the nations back to Yahweh, the cosmic Lawgiver. In short, Israel is called as a community to carry out the original cultural mandate of Ge 1:28 as «image of God.» It will do this in its worship, social existence, and relationship to nature.

One final point worth mentioning is that the Law should never be viewed as static. It is a dynamic instrument used to govern the covenant relationship and necessarily has to adapt to different circumstances. This is confirmed first by the casuistic nature of much of the Law. Casuistic law seeks to address various situations so the Law might be faithfully kept in different circumstances. That is, by its very nature it recognizes a multiplicity of possible situations for which single abstract laws would be inadequate. It can be easily argued that these serve as patterns, suggesting interpretive possibilities as the community encounters varying circumstances that call for creative responses.

Second, most scholars observe within Israel's history a certain development of the Law due to changed circumstances.[5] Even a conservative account of the Pentateuch's formation acknowledges differences between the original Decalogue and the laws contained in Deuteronomy, which as a work is portrayed as a covenant renewal anticipating the imminent occupation of the Promised Land—a new context that calls for adapted laws.

We also witness later interpretations by prophets such as Samuel or Amos, or kings such as David or Hezekiah. In Jeremiah's announcement of a new covenant, in fact, he anticipates the inauguration of a new Law (Jer 31:33). If this is true, then the Pharisees' adaptation of the Law to changed circumstances might be understood very much in this tradition. The error of the Pharisees is not in the development of traditions *per se*, but in the developing of traditions that failed to reflect the spirit of the Law (see Mt 15:1-9). Indeed, their most egregious failure ultimately was the failure to recognize the entire *telos* of the Law as revelation: the person of Christ (Ro 10:4). It is Christ as *telos* of the Law that provides the Law with its ultimate meaning.

Once the Law is divorced from its revelatory function it loses its

[5] See Selman, 507–508.

meaning. While the OT's portrayal of the Law as directly given grants it a special revelatory status, it might be extrapolated that cultures and the meaning systems they create also possess in themselves revelatory potential. Cultures provide institutions, symbols, traditions, and ethical codes that mediate and govern how people interact with the world in which they live, with each other, with God, and with the wider creation. Again, the premise is that cultures possess within themselves the raw material out of which the gospel can be articulated meaningfully.

That said, under the old covenant God chooses to mediate His reign through one particular nation—Israel—with one fairly comprehensive (although dynamic, and thus changing) cultural system articulated in the Law that codifies the religious, economic, political, and social dimensions of Israel's existence. Thus, to join God's covenant community required becoming an Israelite, attaching oneself to the entirety of the life of Israel. This is important to understand because, as we will see, the new covenant introduces a new state of affairs.

New Covenant and Cultural Diversity

It is Christ as the Law's *telos* that becomes the key to understanding Paul's polemic against the Judaizers. The whole Judaizer conflict, which provides stimulus for much of Paul's theological reflection in his writings, is important for understanding the relationship of gospel and culture after the advent of Christ.

To be fair, the Judaizers are faithful to the OT covenant tradition and the demands that the covenant brings to those seeking to join the covenant community. As just mentioned, to join Israel required becoming circumcised and submitting to the OT Law. These were the sociological markers that identified the people of God in the midst of a hostile, polytheistic environment.

What they failed to adequately appreciate was the universalizing force of the Christ-event and the significance of the subsequent outpouring of the Spirit. With the coming of Christ, the apostles are compelled to submit all their previous understandings to re-appraisal as they consider what would necessitate God sending His own Son as a sacrifice. In Paul's re-appraisal, this leads to a relativization of the Law, seeing it as a temporary instrument that human depravity ultimately rendered ineffective (Ro 1:18-3:20). In Christ it has now been superseded. The period of the Law as «tutor» has come to an end and now new means have come into effect for entering and maintaining covenant membership (Gal 3:19-22). The «seed» through which the nations will be blessed is no longer national Israel, but Christ Himself (Gal 3:15-18, 23-29).

This all means that the absolutization of Israel's culture ceases to be in effect. The gospel must be incarnated in various cultures. The community of God, no longer identified with a particular culture (Israel),

now has the obligation to try to interpret its particular cultural situation through the gospel. This is the very task that Israel itself is forced to do in light of the birth, death, and resurrection of Christ.

As cultures vary, this process of interpretation necessitates a certain dynamism in the articulation of the gospel. Here it is helpful to understand the gospel not as a culturally neutral, systematic set of propositions readily translatable into any cultural idiom. Rather, in many ways the church is a «culture» itself, so its engagement with another culture necessitates a dialogical approach, a bi-directional process of contextualization. This entails the narrative of God's dealings with humanity to be articulated using language and symbols that are understandable to the receptor culture.[6] But the more important move of contextualization is in the reverse direction. It is when the host culture becomes contextualized into the gospel. That is, its symbolic universe is interpreted, judged, and integrated into the Christian framework (Grenz' «hearing,» «scrutinizing,» and «responding»[7]).

We have, in fact, an interesting example of this in Paul's extended response to the issue of participation in temple meals in 1Co 8:1-11:1.[8] Paul offers a nuanced reflection on the theological implications of such participation in light of Christian presuppositions. On the one hand, the Christian belief in one God means that such feasts are in fact to nonentities (8:2-6). Additionally, since God is Creator, any food is ultimately from Him and, if received with thanks, can be eaten to His glory (8:6, 8; 10:30).

On the other hand, this explanation fails to take full heed of the claims of the gospel. First, the Corinthians' behavior was a source of moral failure for some and, as such, demonstrated that in the name of «knowledge» several had shamefully failed to manifest love, the central ethic of Christian existence (8:7-13; 10:21-33). Second, Corinthian practice failed to consider the nature of these pagan meals in relation to the Christian celebration of the Eucharist. Both meals involved a two-fold participation (*koinonia*): participation with the deity and participation with fellow worshippers (10:14-22). To take part in the Christian meal by its very nature excluded participation in a pagan feast that involved «participation» with those outside the Christian covenant. Finally, and related to the last point, the Corinthians also failed to take into account

[6] Here the role of narrative distinguishes this approach from traditional approaches to contextualization that sought to strip the gospel of its «particular» clothing to find a sort of naked universal that could then be re-clothed in the particular cultural clothing of another culture. Such approaches rest on the foundationalist search for universal, tradition-free truths—a search that has proven futile.

[7] See Stanley J. Grenz and John R. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 159-60.

[8] For a fuller account of this, see Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthian* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987), 357-63, 471-74.

that while idols themselves were non-realities, there were demonic forces that stood behind these practices, and participation in such feasts meant participation with «demons» (10:19-22, building on Dt 32:17). Thus, in this passage, we find Paul and his interlocutors wrestling with the theological meaning of pagan feasts by trying to «contextualize» these practices into the Christian account of reality.

The challenge of the church is to constantly seek to bring the claims of the gospel to bear on the realities it faces. This necessitates an ongoing process of interpretation and reinterpretation. It opens itself up to the symbol system of any given culture, employing it to articulate the Christian message and to bring out its implications, while at the same time «contextualizing» a culture's self-understanding, bending it to fit the gospel. Theology is ultimately a hopeful enterprise, taking as its presupposition that God can be meaningfully known in a variety of cultures.

Jesus as *Logos*

This hope is grounded in nothing less than the Incarnation itself. Christ did not come in the abstract. The Father revealed Himself not in a systematic description of Himself encoded on a new set of tablets. Rather, God became flesh. Yet not a universal flesh. God in Jesus became a Jewish man who lived in first century Palestine. Jesus, the climax of God's self-revelation to which both the OT and the NT point, is known to us only in His particularity, in the narrative of His life, death, and resurrection.

Significantly, John's prologue (1:1-18) in its application of *logos* to Jesus succeeds in joining God's universal revelation in creation and His particular revelation to the Israelites in the Law to the final universal particular: Jesus Christ. In Greek thought, *logos* enjoys a wide variety of interpretations. For Heraclitus and much later for the Stoics, *logos* represented the rational principle of the universe. Wisdom involved actively seeking to discern the order of this world and to conform one's life to this discovered order.[9]

Of greater importance for John, though, are the Jewish roots of the *logos* concept. Significantly, *logos* is applied to creation in several passages (Ge 33:6; Sir 39:17-18, 31; 43:10, 26). Thus, God's imperatives in creation are seen as showing how the *logos* mediates creation, an understanding that John easily develops in the personified *logos*: Christ (Jn 1:1-3, 10). This, of course, bears powerful similarities to the notion of Wisdom as mediating God's creative work that we saw in Pr 8. Only here in John, in place of personified Wisdom, we have the personalized Word.[10] What we see in this application of *logos* to creation is a dynamic sense that is quite unique to Septuagint usage when compared to

[9] Thomas H. Tobin, «Logos,» *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 4, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 348-49.

[10] See Tobin, «Logos,» for a fuller elaboration of the close connection between John's prologue and Wisdom personified, 353-55.

secular Greek usage. God's word possesses power and accomplishes what it declares (cf. also Pss 119:74; 147:15; Isa 2:3; 45:23).[11]

Two more important usages of *logos* cannot be ignored that also build on its dynamic sense. First, *logos* in its plural form is used to refer to the Mosaic Law (cf. Ex 20:1; Dt 1:1). The Law is the «ordering principle» of Israel's existence. Second, it is the word *logos* that is used in the ubiquitous expression of the prophets, «the word of the Lord» (used 116 times in the Septuagint, predominantly in the Prophets). Here again God's word through his prophets is a means by which He announces His intentions and thereby mediates His rule.

It is in the prologue of John that all of these concepts find their fulfillment in Christ: the Word become flesh. Christ in His person is the Stoic ordering principle that provides meaning to matter. He is the Word through whom God created the world. He is the Wisdom who was present at creation and through whom God crafted the universe. He is the Law that orders Israel's existence. He is the prophetic Word revealing God and His intentions to those who will listen. Unfortunately, though the world owes its existence to the *logos* (1:1-3), it fails to recognize Him (1:10). Even more tragically, Israel, who also comes into existence through the *logos*, rejects Him (1:11).

Thus, in the person of Christ, John offers an example of radical contextualization based on the radical particular of Jesus Christ. He contextualizes Christ by using already extant concepts, integrating (and thus transforming) them into the reality of the Incarnation.

Preliminary Conclusions

As we have briefly surveyed Scripture, we have found certain motifs that provide a means by which we may better understand the relationship between the gospel and culture. Let us briefly list a few of these before we move on to further reflection.

- God as creator means that He has left a certain ordering in the universe that reveals Himself and His ways apart from any special revelation.
- Human beings as God's «image» are inherently culture-creating. Thus, cultures in all their various dimensions inescapably (albeit often quite poorly) bear marks of the divine imprint.
- While God is known generally, He most fully reveals Himself in the particular. Through election He chooses a people to whom He reveals Himself and through whom He mediates His revelation and reign. This particular revelation has a narrative dimension. God enters into history and into relationship with a people. It is this narrative that is preserved and interpreted in Scripture, God's authoritative medium of self-revelation now.
- God's revelation of Himself employs language and concepts already extant. Thus, God uses the transcen-

[11] Tobin, «Logos,» 349-50.

dent potential of human culture. This is not accomplished through translating abstract truths, but rather through contextualizing cultures, i.e. integrating them into the gospel story.

- God's particular revelation of Himself finds its ultimate consummation in the person of Christ, the final and universal particular in and through whom all things have been made. Christ is the great absolute who makes all other truths relative.

A Brief Theological Account of Culture

Before we move on to the implications of our findings for the theological task, it is necessary to briefly articulate a theological understanding of humanity and culture directly challenging modern notions.

As we have argued, human beings are inescapably cultural. The mythical ideal of the autonomous individual somehow abstracted from the «prison» of culture and tradition is a modern creation. This ideal of the autonomous individual who is able to escape his socio-cultural situation has been adopted by both theological conservatives and liberals. These groups, each in their own way, strive for a theology freed from culture. This is a misguided and futile quest.

This, however, does not necessarily need to lead to some sort of hopeless relativizing of truth. To say that humans are cultural is to say nothing more than that we are bound by time and space. It is to affirm several key aspects of the Christian understanding of humanity.

First, humanity is finite. A human being is located in space and time and can never be separated from them. God encounters persons in the space-time continuum called history. The God of Scripture is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He is God-become-flesh. The modern attempt to escape human finitude is the self-same hubris of Babel.

Second, human beings are inherently social. Rousseau's ideal of the happy savage living in an isolated paradise contradicts the Christian understanding of humanity created in the image of God: «male and female he created them» (Ge 1:27). Humanity as the image of God takes on a corporate dimension in this passage. We are created to live in community. This original community achieves its consummation in the church, "the new man" (Eph 2:15), a notion captured in the «in Christ» and "body" language found in Paul's writings. Through the Spirit, the community, in effect, becomes the new incarnation of God's presence on earth. This human community is simultaneously a participation in and a reflection of the Triune community of Father, Son, and Spirit whose "intra"-relatedness does not exclude «extra»-relatedness to the world.

Third, humanity's sociality necessarily leads to culture, a shared set of symbols and meanings that shape our understanding of the world and thereby govern our actions. In the language of Berger, «human society is an enterprise of world-build-

ing.»[12] The «reality» we know is socially constructed. We never have immediate experience of the world outside of us. Our experience is always mediated by the socially constructed «world» that gives order and meaning to all we experience. Cultural systems are always limited, and yet, from a Christian perspective, possess in themselves transcendent potential. Since no single cultural system exhaustively penetrates all reality, cultures by their nature are dynamic, always in the process of change as they encounter new objectivities that challenge their construct of reality.

Finally, humanity is sinful, and this sinfulness is present in the cultures we create. Thus, in addition to our inherent finitude and that of any of our undertakings, human depravity means that cultures often severely distort reality and thus lead people away from God. Human ordering often reflects human striving for autonomy by seeking to eliminate divine claims, either through denying God's existence or more commonly through seeking to use God to justify our selfish actions.

A Trinitarian Account of the Theological Task

The starting point for any account of theology and culture must be God Himself. The presupposition of Christian theology as we have seen borne out in Scripture itself, is that God as Creator actively seeks relationship with His creation. He seeks to be known and makes Himself known both through creation and through His Word.

What is needed is a much more dynamic understanding of God's revelation than is traditionally embraced in evangelical theology.[13] In its engagement with liberalism, evangelical theology succumbed to a foundationalist epistemology[14] that took Scripture as the «indubitable foundation» on which all knowledge can be built. What this has lead to in effect is a virtual reduction of God's self-revelation to the process of inspiration that is exclusively applied to the acts of enscripturation.

Such an approach belies the actual phenomenon of Scripture and grossly truncates the fullness of the way in which God actually reveals Himself. First, we need to briefly explore the nature of natural revelation and then take a closer look at the phenomenon of particular revelation. Our intent is to establish a much more dynamic and Trinitarian account of revelation.

Although natural revelation has fallen on hard times of late, our survey of Scripture granted a certain legitimacy to insisting on this mode of revelation. The notion of God's continued revelation of Himself in a

[12] Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy, Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religions* (New York: Doubleday, 1967), 3.

[13] Helpful here, of course, is Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I.1, trans. G.T. Thomson (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1936), 98-140. See also two more contemporary treatments in Trevor Hart, *Faith Thinking: The Dynamics of Christian Theology* (London: SPCK, 1995), 135-62; and Grenz/Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 57-129.

[14] For a very helpful account, see Nancey Murphy, *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996), 11-35. Grenz/Franke (*Beyond Foundationalism*, 3-54) provide a similar account.

fallen world has ironically developed well in the Reformed theological tradition that at the same time places such great emphasis on total human depravity. First, Calvin notes that despite total human depravity there are those whose lives and deeds excel at some level. For Calvin, this is a sign not of inherent goodness, but that «amid this corruption of nature there is some place for God's grace; not such grace as to cleanse it, but to restrain it inwardly».[15] If providence did not bridle it, human depravity would go unchecked. The presence of «common grace» makes possible human achievements, both individually and corporately. God's image in humanity, though deeply marred, still remains.

This concept of common grace allows an understanding of culture that makes possible the incarnation of the gospel. Marred by sin, culture still possesses traces of God. Even idolatry and other false religions for Calvin reveal humanity's deep-seated aspiration for God.[16] Indeed, absolutely every good that we experience must be attributed to God, the «fountain of every good».[17] Recognizing God as creator and sustainer of this world, we need to be assured that «no drop will be found either of wisdom and light, or of righteousness or power or rectitude, or of genuine truth, which does not flow from him, and of which he is not the cause.»[18] Thus we may learn to await and seek all these things from him, and thankfully to ascribe them, once received, to him.

Again, Calvin writes this obviously not because of any high esteem for human potential. Indeed, it is a deep belief in human depravity that leads him to the conclusion that anything good or noble which we experience in this world must be exclusively from God. Such an understanding is fundamental to opening up the possibility for the positive engagement of culture. It sees culture not as a sinful human creation, but as God's own intent for humanity. It allows for positive human achievement that will serve as the soil for meaningful theological reflection.

The theological grounds for this is that the Father created the world through the divine Word and continues to providentially sustain creation through the ongoing presence of His Spirit. We confidently engage with culture not because of an optimistic view of humanity, but because of hope in the God who seeks to be known. God's continued providential care for the world through the Spirit means that real revelation continues to take place.

While cultures possess in themselves this transcendent potential, it is in the particular that God makes Himself most fully known. Although the voice of the Spirit is not mute in the wider world, it suffers from the surrounding clamor of many other voices. God's voice can most clearly

[15] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion,* Vol. 1 (ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles [Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960]) 2.3.3; cf. 2.2.17.

[16] Ibid., 1.3.1-2.

[17] Ibid., 1.2.1.

[18] Ibid., 1.2.1.

be heard when He reveals Himself at particular times and places to particular people. As Christians we confess that God has broken into history at various times and places to make Himself known, climaxing in the advent of Christ. We recognize these as revelatory events. They are mediated to us through Scripture, which serves as God's primary means of continued revelation to His people.

The move to a scriptural foundationalism in the modern era has led to a diminished view of how revelation actually takes place. An understanding of inspiration which confines it to the very act of Scripture-writing fails to take into account the historical process of revelation.[19] Rather, we know that many, if not most, of the books of the Bible were not written in such a straightforward way. They are products of years (sometimes centuries) of transmission of traditions, both oral and written. These traditions are taken, combined, adapted, and reinterpreted as their meaning is brought to bear on the people of God at particular places and times. As these traditions are written and gathered, a process of canonization takes place whereby the community of God comes to recognize certain texts as especially authoritative for their faith and practice.[20]

In canonization, Scripture is received by the community of God whose task is to interpret it and to bring it to bear on the realities it faces. The church as the Spirit-indwelled body of Christ possesses the ability to know God through the instrument of Scripture. Its task is constantly to submit itself to re-interpretation in light of God's claims through Scripture. God's desire for self-revelation gives cause for considerable hope that the church can attain real knowledge of God.

Again, it is imperative to understand this whole process in a Trinitarian framework. God seeks to make Himself known and thus at various times breaks into history either in action or in word; the climax, of course, coming with the very incarnation of Christ. Spirit-led communities produce, transmit, and adapt traditions that seek to mediate these events to others. Spirit-led communities through time

[19] See Bruce M. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 254-57. Here Metzger gives a fuller description of how the term «inspiration» was much more widely applied in the early church and included works of some of the early church fathers. For example, Gregory of Nyssa applies the term *theopneustos* that is used in 2Ti 3:16 to refer to his brother Basil's commentary on the first six days of creation. Inspiration is better understood as the Spirit of God speaking through particular people. As such, it is a necessary but insufficient criterion for Scripture, since God speaks through people outside of Scripture. The elevation of inspiration to such a particular place of importance in evangelical theology was out of a concern to maintain Scripture's authority over against the treatments of liberalism. A much more theologically sound approach would have been to appeal to the category of canon, which by its nature includes in itself the necessary authority. This option, however, has always been less attractive to Protestants, since canon also entails a much greater appreciation for tradition and the church (however vigorously Protestants may try to argue against this idea).

[20] See Trevor Hart, *Faith Thinking*, 155-62.

take some of these traditions and recognize them as normative. Spirit-led communities continue the process of taking these traditions and interpreting them for new audiences. These Spirit-engendered traditions then guide the communities' reading of Scripture, yet Scripture as canonical means that these traditions must be open to constant re-appraisal. We want to maintain Scripture's special status as God's "norming norm," the chief instrument of God's self-revelation.[21] However, we want to do this in a way that stresses fundamental continuity in the whole process of revelation: from historical event to tradition to canon to interpretation. Such an approach allows for a certain degree of confidence in the possibility of the theological task. Again, we can know God and articulate this knowledge because God wants to be known.[22]

However, it is critical also to stress that the church's readings of Scripture are never exhaustive. The church is a human community, which means that the church's readings are always partial and always affected by sin. This demands humility on the part of the theologian and on the part of any theological tradition. Theology is always an eschatological act, a partial apprehension of God that will only become full at the advent of Christ.

Theology is always culturally conditioned. Theology by its nature cannot escape being expressed in a particular language employing particular conceptualities. This need not be cause for despair, as our thesis of the transcendent potential of culture means that the culture-conditioned nature of theology does not exclude God-knowledge, but rather makes it possible. We have also insisted on God's continual self-revelation, first through Scripture and second, derivatively from Scripture, through tradition. What this means, though, is that no culture can claim a monopoly on theological expression.

As has been said, the confidence in God's continued self-revelation leads to a renewed appreciation for tradition. If God's revelation does not end with the writing of Scripture (as evangelical accounts often seem to imply), then we must give due attention to the ways in which God's self-revelation in Scripture has been received by Christian communities in history. We must attend to the voice of the Spirit in these particular times and places. There are certain traditions that acquire such a degree of catholicity that they attain a status close (but not equal) to Scripture. In Trinitarian terms, we understand that God on certain occasions outside of Scripture has spoken in ways that

[21] See Grenz/Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 57-92.

[22] Additionally, the presuppositions that invariably shape our interpretations stem from cultures that still possess in themselves transcendent potentialities, as even depraved humanity is in the «image of God» and cannot fully remove God's presence from this world no matter how hard we try (again, see Calvin 1.3.3). Thus, we need not view presuppositions as inevitably misleading. Our culturally-bound presuppositions possess in themselves elements that open us to God's self-revelation.

have received a certain finality. A good example of this is the Trinitarian formulations we find in the creeds. To be a Christian in the post-Nicene world means invariably to read Scripture in a Trinitarian way.

Respect for Christian tradition need not be restricted to earlier historical expressions. The church now consists of a variety of cultural expressions which can help inform our own theological strivings. In an age of easy communication, the church now has resources that have been little known in earlier times.

Encountering other theological traditions helps surface the presuppositions that guide our thinking. Since our thinking is culturally conditioned, this can be quite useful to help us identify certain presuppositions that may actually distort our reading of Scripture. Thus, if we want to benefit from the fullness of God's self-revelation in the world, it is incumbent upon us to be attentive to other theological traditions both past and present.

The particularity of God's revelation to his elect has implications for the way we engage culture. First, as we saw earlier, against many contextualization models, we do not abstract truths, which are then clothed in a new set of cultural symbols. There is no such thing as a culture-free articulation of the gospel.

The church must be understood both «as» culture and «in» culture. The church «as» culture is in the business of «world» creation.[23] Grenz shows how the church «as» culture manifests various traits that all cultures possess:[24]

- the church is a group of people related to each other who share a certain form of behavior (consider 1Pe and how outsiders could not understand Christian behavior)
- the church has a "story" that unites it in its explanation of the world that it lives in
- the church has certain symbols to which it attaches significance: images (cross, empty tomb) and rituals (baptism and the Lord's Supper)
- the church as a community «seeks to perpetuate itself institutionally as well as propagate a particular vision of meaning making and world construction»
- the church is united by a common mission: worship, edification, and outreach

Thus, the church offers a vision of reality and mediates this to the members of the community through its institutions, teaching, and rituals. Members become habituated to this reality and order their lives around it. It is from this vantage point that the church engages culture.

However, the church «as» culture is also the church «in» culture. That is, any particular church is never a pure, culturally-free manifestation of the gospel. Our embodiment of the gospel is always a culturally-conditioned one. This is not a negative thing; it is merely a fact of our hu-

[23] See Grenz/Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism,* 165-66.
[24] What follows is taken from Grenz/Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism,* 163-64.

man existence. To speak and to live the gospel is to do so applying an already existing language and already accepted sets of symbols and practices.

However, for the culture to maintain its integrity it must remain faithful to the distinctiveness of its «cultural» identity. In the interaction between church and culture, the church's identity must not be overcontextualized. The way to protect the integrity of the church's specific identity is by affirming the central place of the Christian narrative as well as by maintaining the centrality of its identity-forming rituals (with special emphasis on preaching, Eucharist, and baptism). It is thus the gospel in its narrative and lived particularity that must be articulated in another culture to ensure that its integrity is not lost.

The best metaphor for this process is that of dialogue. However, the gospel and culture never enter into dialogue on equal grounds. The Christian self-understanding necessitates that it will be an asymmetrical dialogue, involving an interpretation of prevailing cultural understandings in terms of the gospel narrative (albeit an always culturally- and tradition-mediated reading of the gospel narrative). The gospel in its radical claims relativizes all other truth claims. Helpful here is to note how Jesus as the «way, the truth, and the life» relativized the OT Law. He boldly pointed to Himself as its fulfillment.

Paul develops this theme of the relativizing implications of Christ for both the Jews and the Gentiles in 1Co 1:17-31. Here he proclaims the crucified Christ as the Wisdom that both Jew and Gentile receive as foolishness. This should encourage vigilance in our attempts to make the gospel understandable to the surrounding culture. While cultures possess symbolic systems that make the articulation of the gospel possible, the gospel by its nature radically challenges the often mistaken core beliefs and aspirations of any culture.

It is the narrative that actually protects the gospel from endless accommodation and it is thus the narrative that must serve as the source for theology and to which theology must continually submit itself to check its readings.[25] An example of the importance of narrative for theological formulation is seen in an example provided by Lesslie Newbigin drawn from his experience working in Hindu India.[26] He recounts the problem of translating the word «Lord» into Tamil in the Indian context:

[25] See earlier discussion of 1Co 8:1-11:1 where the controversy over meat sacrificed to idols is resolved through an examination of Christian claims and practices.

[26] See Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission*, Rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 19ff. See also David S. Yeago, «The New Testament and the Nicene Dogma: A Contribution to the Recovery of Exegesis,» *The Theological Interpretation of Scripture*, ed. Stephen E. Fowl (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), 87-100. This is an illuminating article on the NT origins of Nicene dogma.

> *Swamy* is usually translated "Lord," but it does not have the meaning that the word *Kurios* had for a Greek-speaking Jew. It denotes not Yahweh, the Lord of the Old Testament, but one of the myriad gods who fill the pages of the Hindu epics. *Avatar* is usually translated "incarnation," but there have been many *avatars* and there will be many more. To announce a new *avatar* is not to announce any radical change in the nature of things. Even to use the word *kadavul*[27] will only provoke the question: "If Jesus is *kadavul*, who is the one to whom he prays?"[28]

This illustrates the way in which culture, here language, always mediates our understanding. The gospel in speaking of supra-cultural realities always is spoken of through cultural forms that strain to get at the meaning. Here we see how Tamil possesses an array of words that can communicate the transcendent. The problem lies in how the Hindu context so shapes the meaning of each of these words that they fail to do justice to the Christian understanding. As Newbigin notes Jesus is not just *swamy*; he is the one and only *swamy*. Jesus is not just *avatar*; he is unique *avatar*. *Kadavul* cannot be understood as monad, but must refer to a reality where relationship is possible. These words must be contextualized into the gospel narrative and only then can they be usefully employed for giving a Christian account of reality.[29]

Thus, contextualization is best understood as an asymmetrical dialogue in which the gospel is articulated into a given cultural system and the cultural system is contextualized into the gospel. While easily said, this proves much more difficult in practice, since as already mentioned we are all members of cultures that serve as the interpretive prism through which we interpret all reality. What we see and understand in Scripture is widely conditioned by the cultural constructs that we possess. In Christian terms, we read the gospel through a particular tradition. Just as we have no access to universal truths freed from cultural particularity, so too our theology is also not free from our tradition (which in turn reflects our surrounding culture).

For some this is a reason for despair. In fact, it is no more than a description of our own human finitude; as already emphasized, we are creatures bound by space and time. To escape a fragmented relativism, we need not flee to a modernist epistemology that seeks certainty in a particular method based on an unchallengeable foundation. Rather, our hope should be directed to God and to His self-revelatory movement towards us. We cannot escape our particularity, but we have the assurance that God will come to us and encounter us in this particularity just as he did with Israel, later in Christ and now in the church as Spirit-led bearer of God's continuing

[27] Newbigin earlier notes that this means «the transcendent God» (*The Open Secret,* 20).
[28] Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 20.
[29] Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 20.

revelation. Thus, our faith is rightly directed toward the Triune God and not toward ourselves and our imperfect, albeit well-intentioned, methods.

What theology invites us to is an ongoing discipleship where we continually submit our understandings to God's revelation of Himself in Scripture (primarily) and tradition (secondarily). With any human task there are always dangers. Here we have the danger of both under-contextualization and over-contextualization.

Over-contextualization is the danger to which liberalism succumbed. In the drive to make the gospel relevant, liberalism gave culture a privileged position over and against Scripture and tradition. In so doing, the gospel became prisoner to every cultural wind. Under-contextualization, however, is no less of a threat. This is the threat to which the Judaizers fell victim. They bound the gospel to one particular culture. In so doing, they prevented it from exercising its full force in the Galatian community.

Under-contextualization is the danger to which evangelicalism is most prone. In its primitivist tendencies, evangelicalism is ever in search of becoming the first-century church. Such an aspiration suffers from an extremely truncated understanding of God's self-revelatory capacity.[30] Ironically, in its noble desire to be maximally faithful to Scripture, this striving often limits the authority of Scripture by not allowing it to speak to today's realities. Through a proof-text approach, theology's scope is limited to the issues raised (or thought to be raised) in Scripture. In a world where technology, modernist epistemology, capitalism, democracy, and materialism fundamentally shape our identity and our hopes, such an approach invariably leads to a very attenuated form of Christian discipleship.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we engage in theology as an act of discipleship in response to God's continuing self-revelation to us. We, as members of Spirit-indwelled communities, listen to the voice of the Spirit first and foremost in Scripture and tradition. Our listening, however, comes to us in our cultural situation. The Reformed notion of common grace gives us reason for optimism that cultural forms and systems all possess some level of transcendent possibilities. The privileged position of the particularity of the gospel requires us to grant it a privileged position in the dialogical process of bi-directional contextualization that involves the articulation of the gospel in already given cultural symbols while integrating these symbols into the Christian story. Ultimately, theology is an eschatological enterprise, a search for God that will find its consummation only at the second advent. It is this hope that must guide and sustain all meaningful theological reflection.

[30] It also begs the question as to which first-century church it seeks to become: the Corinthian church? The Laodicean church? The Galatian church?

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