

Evangelical Theology and Culture: A Taxonomy

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Introduction

The issue of culture affects virtually every aspect of evangelical theology and proclamation. In ethics, the debate has often been crafted in terms of worldliness versus separation from evil. From the vantage point of apologetics, the question is asked about the pursuit of common ground between the believer and the unbeliever in light of the disparate frameworks for even asking what questions are important. Missiologists look at culture from the point of view of contextualization. In ecclesiology evangelicals debate church growth issues and the extent to which cultural tendencies observed in sociology can be brought over into decision making by church leaders and congregations. In addition, the music wars are at least partly a debate about the validity of borrowing cultural forms for expression within church worship. Controversies over creation science, intelligent design, and evolution are caught up somewhat in the question of whether the culturally accepted insights from a naturalistic framework trump various interpretations of Scripture.

In light of this almost overwhelming significance of how one views culture, it is perhaps surprising that evangelical theology has only within recent times become serious about developing a theology of culture and precious little of that effort has been focused on establishing a *biblical* theology of culture. Our systematic theologies have dealt with anthropology but usually in its individualistic aspect, usually related to the extremely important topics of total depravity and the image of God in man. However, little has been said about the social and corporate structures of culture. Also, much of the evangelical analysis of culture has been the self-evaluation presented in the various evangelical critiques. As such it often deals with evangelical sub-culture as much as or more than the greater integrative questions.

Perhaps the largeness of the task has prevented the holistic look. Perhaps, too, liberalism co-opted the question of culture during the great divide of the fundamentalist-modernist controversy. Thus, evangelicalism has been left with a focus on supernaturalism with an edge, an edge that hinders its consideration of culture. It may also be that Catholicism's focus on tradition with its brand of syncretistic cultural adaptation reinforces the negativity of culture in the evangelical mind. However, the fact that decisions relative to culture are made every day in our lives and in our churches forces us to take up the task. We deal with the question of culture implicitly even if we do not do so explicitly.

A survey of many of the older evangelical theologies from 1850 to 1950 reveals that culture *per se* is not a serious category in theological formulation. For example, Hodge, Shedd, Strong, Berkhof, and Chafer never fully discuss the *idea* of culture as it is used in the present time.¹ These theologians can only be studied in this regard by their interaction with false viewpoints presented in the culture of their time, by their unconscious adoption of contemporary methodologies, or by their discussion of natural revelation. However, this should not be surprising in light of the Victorian notion that culture is defined by what is best in human thought, action, and speech as explained in Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy* (1869). It may be safe to say, that until very recent times, the evangelical

¹ Perhaps the first major evangelical theologian and thinker marking a break with the older forms of theology in this regard would be Carl Henry who broke new ground in his attempt to see a more culturally sensitive and socially responsible evangelicalism. See Carl Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority*, (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1976; reprint, Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1999): 1:31-43, 395-409; *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1947) and a host of other works by Henry. See also, D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge, eds., *God and Culture: Essays in Honor of Carl F. H. Henry*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993).

understanding of culture has not really taken into view the entire range of human actions and experiences. As a result, perhaps, culture was not really viewed as a major category for theological formulation.

However, the last fifty plus years has seen a dramatic increase in evangelical interest in the full-orbed understanding of culture and its relationship to theological formulation and Christian action. At times theological discussions of culture appear relegated to the field of applied theology.² Increasingly, evangelicals are going beyond this aspect of intersection with culture and are engaging culture as a category within the framework of their overall theological method. However, there is nothing near a consensus on the issue within evangelicalism. So below I will present various options crafted by evangelical theologians.

Transcultural Theology

By transcultural theology I mean theology that organizes theological expression around transcultural doctrinal categories. This does not mean that there is no cultural sensitivity in such theology. Such an approach simply does not focus acutely on cultural problems of the times as starting points for theological discussion. It also would not dismiss out of hand the need to formulate doctrinal statements in language understood by the present culture. However, it pursues a theology that pertains primarily to all men at all times and not just to a given generation or subculture. Lewis and Demarest model this approach when they say

The immediate issues of a given culture provide valuable conversational starting points, but the study of each basic Christian doctrine begins with a problem of permanent, transcultural significance. A theological treatment of the multitudes of specific issues in each culture and subculture is important, but that can best be done by Christians who have specialized in the areas of the sciences, history, psychology, sociology, etc. Furthermore multitudes of contemporary issues may pass out of date almost as quickly as daily newspapers. The classical issues and doctrines have exhibited universal and permanent relevance because they are common to all men and women from the Near East, the Far East, and the West, in the two-thirds world and the one-third world, in rural areas and the large cities.³

In such a scheme, the transcultural categories of the Bible are the driving force for theological expression.

In a similar way, Erickson argues that the biblical interpreter must glean from the Bible itself those doctrines that transcend all of the subcultures of the biblical authors.⁴ In so doing, he helps to establish the criteria of permanence whereby a doctrine can be viewed as transcultural within all of history. This in turn allows the interpreter to contemporize the Christian message to his own culture. Erickson rightly rejects the liberal approach to contemporizing theology, which transforms the biblical message in light of cultural change brought on by modernism. Instead he opts for a translation model in which the universal components of the Bible are expressed in contemporary language.⁵ However, his approach does not appear to go any further in invoking culture as a category in theological method. In addition, this understanding of theology appears to be the opinion of a vast majority of theologians during two thousand years of church history.

² David S. Dockery, ed., *New Dimensions in Evangelical Thought*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998). I find it highly interesting that the major articles in this book dealing with culture are grouped together with articles on ethics and church life under the heading of “New Dimensions in Applied Theology.” However, it should also be noted that at least one article includes culture as a major partner in the task of theological formulation (Clark H. Pinnock, “New Dimensions in Theological Method,” 205-06).

³ Gordon R. Lewis and Bruce A. Demarest, *Integrative Theology*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 1:9-10.

⁴ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, (2nd ed., Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 130.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 122-29.

Transformative Theology

The transcultural theology just described would admit that Christian theology lived out would have a transforming effect upon current culture. However, I am here using the label *transformative theology* to refer to theological constructions, which bring this idea in an overt or explicit way into the task of theology. Many evangelicals within this group would agree for the most part with doctrinal formulations in transcultural theology. However, transformative theologians are not satisfied with the limitations they see in this approach.

Vanhoozer, reacting to Grudem, describes Grudem's approach as suggesting that "the main task of evangelical theology is to determine what the 'whole Bible' says about particular topics of special concern and importance. The way forward would seem to be a 'whole Bible exegesis' in which biblical scholars could determine what the whole Bible teaches about a given subject."⁶ Vanhoozer's criticism of this approach is that "it seems rather arbitrary to set about doing theology by asking, 'What does the whole Bible say about x, about y, about z?' If theology is to be more than a rag-bag collection, it must demonstrate the deeper connections *among* x, y, and z . . . Rather than asking what the relevant parts of the whole Bible say about such and such an issue, evangelical theologians must seek to understand all the parts in light of the Bible as a unified whole."⁷ I am not sure that Grudem would really disagree with the last sentiment. However, Vanhoozer is moving to add another point:

Studying biblical words and concepts takes us only so far. It is one thing to know how a biblical author spoke or thought about a particular issue in the context of ancient Israel or the early church, quite another to relate those words and thoughts about a particular issue to the message of the Bible as a whole and to the significance of the Bible's teaching for us today.⁸

Notice the last phrase. Vanhoozer has added the issue of significance or application to the mix. Here is precisely where his view of theology's handling of culture comes in.

Vanhoozer, unlike most of the transcultural theologians, chooses to use theological language in a way to take account of the category of application as a method of dealing with and transforming current culture.⁹ "What I am now proposing to consider," he asserts, "is hermeneutics itself as a means of constructing culture."¹⁰ He highlights Augustine's example of providing rules for Bible interpretation that "yielded a Christian culture that lasted almost a thousand years."¹¹ Notice the following statements in Vanhoozer's approach:

⁶ Kevin J. VanHoozer, "The Voice of the Actor: A Dramatic Proposal about the Ministry and Minstrelsy of Theology" in *Evangelical Futures* edited by John G. Stackhouse, Jr., (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 62. I take Grudem's approach to be in the transcultural theology category. See Wayne Grudem, "Do We Act As If We Really Believe that 'the Bible Alone, and the Bible in Its Entirety, Is the Word of God Written?'" *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 43 (March 2000): 5-26 and *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994).

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., 62-63.

⁹ In my own thinking the category of application is part of the theological task although I prefer not to use the word *hermeneutics* in conjunction with it. I must also remark that my general theological preference lies with the transculturalists. One can incorporate the need for application into the task of doing theology without subordinating meaning to behavioral performance.

¹⁰ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *First Theology*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 332.

¹¹ Ibid.

Hermeneutics—the art and science of applying as well as interpreting texts—is thus an important aspect of creating cultures.

“Correct” interpretation of Scripture means living a life of love and service to God, to the church as the people of God, and to the world.

We really understand the story of Jesus only when we perform it.

Performing the story of Jesus leads to an interpretive practice that challenges the predominant cultural trend.¹²

One can see the current trend to include application within the umbrella of the language of hermeneutics. However, the task of application has an explicit goal -- the creating of cultures. In addition, there appears to be a reciprocal relationship between “understanding” and “performance.” Right interpretation of Scripture requires obedience to God in the church and world, but right interpretation really only *comes* when we perform the teachings of Scripture. When we arrive at this correct place, the Christian faith can then successfully challenge the prevailing notions in culture.

While there are some elements of truth to this scheme, I find Vanhoozer’s language confusing and liable to misunderstanding. The advantage of transcultural theology is that it does not normally confuse what the text meant when it was written with what the text “means” to the modern day reader. However, here transformative theology of the kind Vanhoozer engages in values the *practice* of Scripture the same as or more than exegesis when it comes to the matter of understanding. Right away one wonders if he is talking about a certain “level” of understanding. If we mean cognitive understanding, can we really say that we understand the story of Jesus *only* when we perform it? Can someone not know the story well and still reject it? Even for Christians who have embraced the story and *know* it better from experience, does there not remain the possibility of real transgression or rebellion by God’s people against certain behavioral norms that they *know* to be true? In the end, I am not sure that the attempt to balance cognitive and experiential knowledge of Scriptural truth in Vanhoozer’s theological framework is the best way to voice theological application to impact culture. For one, transcultural elements of biblical truth may not stand out appropriately if experience helps drive understanding. Second, the significance of the objective nature of the propositional revelation of the Bible may be diminished. Furthermore, it is not at all clear that one could follow this approach without confusing the rules of exegesis with the rules of application. While related, they are distinct tasks within the theological enterprise.

Culture-Inclusive Theology

The final category I want to consider among current evangelical approaches to theology and culture is what I am calling *culture-inclusive theology*. While transcultural theology attempts to speak to culture from the point of view of universals and transformative theology addresses culture by incorporating into its theological system a “doing” of theology, culture-inclusive theology approaches culture by including it as a major category in the determination of theological statements.

Grenz provides an example of what I would call a culture-inclusive theologian.¹³ His creative work over the last several years is well known in evangelical circles. He shares with Vanhoozer the same concerns about the rise of postmodern culture and the need to address it theologically, practically, and behaviorally. He also voices an

¹² Ibid., 332-33.

¹³ My purpose here is not to do a full-blown analysis of Grenz’ reformulation of evangelical theology from a post-foundationalist, post-conservative, and postmodern framework. Many have undertaken that task. Let me suggest a stimulating article comparing Grenz and Carl Henry: Rodney J. Decker, “Revisioning the Nature of Biblical Revelation: A Critique of Stanley Grenz’s Proposals,” *The Journal of Ministry and Theology* 8 (Spring 2004): 5-36.

acceptance of the Spirit speaking through the Bible as the primary and ultimate authority in the church.¹⁴ Secondly, tradition serves to inform theological statements by helping us to recognize the tradition within which we stand, as interpreters within a certain Christian community.¹⁵

However, what is important for the present discussion is how Grenz handles a third important component – culture. He would argue that the Spirit speaking through Scripture is done in a specific historical-cultural context. What does this really mean? Grenz answers, “The specificity of the Spirit’s speaking means that the conversation with cultural context is crucial to the hermeneutical task. We seek to listen to the voice of the Spirit through Scripture as the Spirit speaks to us in the particularity of the historical-cultural context in which we live.”¹⁶ The implication of this approach is that theology must take into account culture as a major input into its theological categories.

What such a focus on culture leads to is a rather enlarged view of the positive value of natural revelation for theology. Grenz explains,

This hermeneutical process occurs in part as contemporary “knowledge”—the discoveries and insights of the various disciplines of human learning—informs our theological construction. For example, theories about addictions and addictive behavior can provide insight into the biblical teaching about sin. Likewise, current discoveries about the process of human identity formation can lead to a deeper or wider awareness of the many dimensions entailed in the new identity the Spirit seeks to create in us through our union with Christ. Our theological reflections can draw from the so-called secular sciences, because ultimately no discipline is in fact purely secular.¹⁷

Grenz justifies this wide appropriation of cultural knowledge in this way: “Because the life-giving Spirit is present wherever life flourishes, the Spirit’s voice can conceivably resound through many media, including the media of human culture.”¹⁸

¹⁴ Stanley J. Grenz, “Articulating the Christian Belief-Mosaic” in *Evangelical Futures*, edited by John G. Stackhouse, Jr., (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 127. A version of this chapter can also be found in his book *Renewing the Center: Evangelical Theology in a Post-Theological Era*, (Wheaton: Victor, 1994). Interestingly, Grenz relies heavily on contemporary speech-act theory (125). Vanhoozer strongly shares and engages this pursuit (*First Things*, 159-203). Vanhoozer comments, “The most fruitful recent development for the dialogue between philosophy and theology about language is undoubtedly the emphasis on language as a species of human action: speech acts. Examining what people *do* with language represents a fascinating case study for the broader dialogue between philosophy and theology. Of course the idea that humans do things *in* speaking was well known to the very earliest biblical authors, even without the analytic concepts of speech act philosophy” (161). To be sure, Vanhoozer attempts to control modern understandings of language with biblical categories. Both Vanhoozer and Grenz share this interest in speech acts in their theological formulation apparently due to their endeavor to engage postmodern culture. There is nothing wrong in attempting to understand fully the implications of human language as we have come to understand it in recent times. However, in my judgment, the use of the new categories often over-complicates the theological enterprise and does not necessarily help to dispel confusion.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 126-27.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 127.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 127.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 128.

Throughout history evangelicals have not normally expressed the above sentiment quite so strongly. Immediately one wonders if the uniqueness of the Spirit's speaking through Scripture is overwhelmed in the balance of things by such an appeal. Grenz attempts to relate the three components of theological construction (Scripture, tradition, culture) by an appeal to the so-called "perichoretic dance:"

Furthermore, culture and biblical text do not comprise two different moments of communication (with tradition then forming a third); rather, they are ultimately one speaking. Consequently, even though the focus at any given moment might be Scripture, tradition, or culture, we do not engage in different 'listening,' but one. Regardless of what may be the particular 'text' being 'read' in the moment, we always bring that specific 'reading' into conversation with the other two partners in the perichoretic dance.¹⁹

Even though Grenz speaks of the Spirit speaking with ultimate authority in Scripture, the fact that Scripture reading cannot be separated from tradition and culture at all shows that culture, according to Grenz, is an integral part of the making of theological statements. His theology is culture inclusive.

What are we to make of such an approach? On the face of things, it is a denial that transcultural theology is possible. While Grenz does attempt to ground his system in the universal aspects of Christian trinitarianism, communitarianism, and eschatological orientation, his discussion leaves one wondering if his choices are arbitrary. Why these categories and no others? In fact, his starting point for discussing these three universal aspects is tradition and culture, not the text of the Bible.²⁰ The impression that is left is that Grenz does not seriously embrace any form of propositional revelation by which to adjudicate the claims of tradition and culture. Theology as a second-order task is only description and merely the conversation of the three partners in the dance. As a result, there is no real "faith which was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3) and the unity of the Universal Church cannot be clearly expressed, especially in doctrinal terms (Eph. 4).

In my judgment, Grenz's theological approach owes more to post-liberalism than to the evangelical heritage from which he comes. He seems to be in harmony with George Lindbeck who noted, "Meaning is constituted by the uses of a specific language rather than being distinguishable from it. Thus, the proper way to determine what 'God' signifies, for example, is by examining how the word operates within a religion and thereby shapes reality and experience rather than by first establishing its propositional or experiential meaning and reinterpreting or reformulating its uses accordingly."²¹ This appears to be the real danger of culture-inclusive theology. Theological expressions are no longer really controlled by Scripture regardless of claims of biblical authority.

Conclusion

In this minimal survey of how evangelical theologians have handled the issue of culture, I have presented samples of three distinct approaches: transcultural, transformative, and culture-inclusive theologies. Transcultural theology focuses on theological statements rooted in Scripture that transcend all cultures in all centuries. Transformative theology attempts to see theology in the making as Christians actually do the Word thereby impacting culture. Culture-inclusive theology places culture as a major category that governs theological formulation.

¹⁹ Ibid., 128-29.

²⁰ Ibid., 129-36.

²¹ George A. Lindbeck, "Toward a Postliberal Theology" in *Theology After Liberalism: A Reader*, edited by John Webster and George P. Schnier, (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000), 363. This chapter is an excerpt from Lindbeck's *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1984).

In the end, while acknowledging that there are valuable insights that can be seen in all three approaches, I must confess my position as a transculturalist. This is grounded in the text of Scripture itself, which contains a plot line from universal curse to an abiding hope that is intended for worldwide impact and scope. This understanding is reinforced by the knowledge that the real concerns of real people in all cultures are universal. Sane mothers in all cultures love their children. All people mourn the death of loved ones. All struggle with the issues of suffering. War has been a curse in all centuries and all cultures. In short, there is much more commonality to the human condition down through the centuries, whether individualistic or social, than some of the more recent postmodern fragmented theologies allow.