

NOETIC SIN, NEUTRALITY, AND CONTEXTUALIZATION: HOW CULTURE RECEIVES THE GOSPEL

by
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Knowing that the overuse of superlatives can cheapen a tribute into mere flattery, I take a risk in identifying Dr. McCune as among the greatest of mentors for adolescent theologs in the present generation. It is by God's good providence that I can name him as my own mentor. Dr. McCune's personal godliness and practical theology contribute immensely to this privileged role as mentor, and he needs defer to none in these areas; however, the field in which Dr. McCune has excelled most visibly is that of systematics.

I did not fully grasp the idea of a systematic theology until I took two final classes from Dr. McCune, one on the Kingdom and the other on apologetics, to complete my M.Div. at DBTS. I can well remember the eureka moment, while taking these classes, when I finally understood that systematic theology was not an anthology of individual doctrinal studies or an assortment of fragmentary bits of biblical theology, but that the fundamentalist, dispensationalist, Calvinist, Baptist, and other elements in Dr. McCune's theology were really part of a single, integrated system—a system that eschews antinomy and loves congruity. Nowhere is this seen more clearly than in his discussions of the Kingdom (or, as he likes to call it, “the unifying center to all God's activity”) and of presuppositionalist apologetics. It is the latter of these two topics that this essay will address, and I trust that its contents accurately reflect Dr. McCune's theology and truly celebrate his contribution to fundamentalist scholarship.

INTRODUCTION

Evangelical Christianity today is absorbed with the quest for relevance. The question “What is the gospel?” has slowly been supplanted by the question, “Of what value is the gospel?” and the concurrent

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assumption that if the gospel cannot be communicated in simple, attractive, culturally relevant, and otherwise advantageous terms, it stands a significant chance of rejection.

The concept of “contextualization,” the fruit of this quest, sprang up almost overnight in the literature of Protestant Liberal missions work,² but evangelicalism quickly garnered a corner on the concept. Because of its relative novelty, “contextualization” has been variously defined,³ but a general evangelical consensus has grown around David J. Hesselgrave’s definition:

Contextualization can be thought of as an attempt to communicate the message of the person, works, word, and will of God in a way that is faithful to God’s revelation, especially as it is put forth in the teachings of the Holy Scripture, and that is meaningful to respondents in their respective cultural and existential contexts.⁴

Hesselgrave’s definition has much to commend it. It displays a deep concern for “faithfulness to God’s revelation” and assumes an inerrant, divine, absolute truth deposit that may not be corrupted. He is also deeply concerned that this message be communicated regularly and accurately to the unregenerate. However, in calling for a gospel presentation that is “*meaningful* to respondents in their respective cultural and existential contexts,” Hesselgrave makes some substantial assumptions concerning the mammoth topic of epistemology in a culture beset by the effects of noetic sin.⁵ These assumptions have prompted a

²The first usage of the term in a theological context is generally identified as occurring in *Ministry in Context: The Third Mandate Programme of the Theological Education Fund* (Bromley, England: Theological Education Fund, 1972).

³David Hesselgrave identifies several of these definitions as well as several recurring themes in developing his own definition (*Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991], pp. 135–37).

⁴*Contextualization* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989), p. 200. The liberal version retains all the human traditions, culture, and social ethos of Hesselgrave’s definition, but omits his faithfulness to the inerrant revelation of Scripture.

⁵Hesselgrave does, to be sure, defend his assumptions about epistemology elsewhere, most significantly in his “Contextualization and Revelation Epistemology,” in *Hermeneutics, Inerrancy, and the Bible*, ed. Earl D. Radmacher and Robert D. Preus (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), pp. 693–738. However, his discussion emphasizes *preunderstandings* rather than *presuppositions*. The difference is subtle but profound. Hesselgrave’s preunderstandings are not ultimately determinative—they are merely influential. A presupposition, on the other hand, “is not just any assumption in an argument, but a personal commitment that is held at the most basic level of one’s network of beliefs. Presuppositions form a wide-ranging, foundational perspective (or starting point) in terms of which everything else is interpreted and evaluated. As such, presuppositions have the greatest authority in one’s thinking, being treated as one’s least negotiable beliefs and being granted the highest immunity to revision” (Greg Bahnsen, *Van Til’s Apologetic: Readings and Analysis* [Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian &

small but persistent cluster of dissent among some, particularly members of certain Dutch Calvinist, counter-cultural, and fundamentalist groups.

The point of conflict centers largely on the idea of commonalities between the regenerate and the unregenerate. At issue are the following questions: (1) what points of knowledge, belief, and action are shared indiscriminately by believers and unbelievers? (2) what is the origin of these commonalities: the image of God? common grace? common conditioning? or, as some have proposed, illicit borrowing? and (3) does the utilization of these commonalities provide sufficient common ground to enhance the likelihood of the success of the gospel message?

The purpose of this paper is to examine the concepts of noetic sin and neutrality in culture with a view to determining a theologically sound method for contextualizing the gospel message.

SUMMARY OF DEFINITIONS AND MODELS OF CONTEXTUALIZATION

Whether or not one agrees with Hesselgrave's approach to contextualization, it can probably be safely maintained that his writings reflect a confidence that comes from having few rivals of any stature. Because of this absence of dissent from fellow-evangelicals, Hesselgrave is free to curtail his discussions of ontology and epistemology, the nexus of debate, in many of his works.⁶ Also absent are discussions of theological systems (Calvinism and Arminianism and their respective views of sin) and sub-systems (e.g., millennial notions of the relationship of church and culture) that lead to diverse understandings of contextualization. Other models of contextualization do exist, however, and summaries of some of these alternative models have surfaced within the literature of contextualization. A discussion of two of these summaries will fill the bulk of this section.

H. Richard Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture*⁷

In 1951, some twenty years before the term "contextualization" emerged on the theological stage, H. Richard Niebuhr wrote a groundbreaking summary of approaches the church has historically taken toward its culture.

Reformed, 1998], p. 2). By speaking of preunderstandings, Hesselgrave does not posit depraved presuppositions that are "immune to revision," but a litany of socio-cultural and linguistic influences, many of which are "neutral." It is this neutrality that I object to—a neutrality that goes largely undiscussed in Hesselgrave's writings.

⁶but see n. 5 above.

⁷San Francisco: Harper, 1951.

Before summarizing these approaches Niebuhr, among other preliminaries, defines what he means by *culture*, a task which the topic of this paper demands as well. His definition is “that total process of human activity and that total result of such activity” a term synonymous with “civilization.”⁸ This definition is brief and begs for a bit more explanation, perhaps, than is provided by Niebuhr, but the key ingredients Niebuhr intends are firmly in place. *Culture* is an all-encompassing term that describes the total end product of the (singular) human worldview. Throughout his work, Niebuhr is not describing multiple “cultures” that follow geographical or ethnic lines, but a single human culture.⁹

Excursus: Defining *Worldview*

This foregoing explanation of the term *culture* yields a second term that demands definition: *worldview*. This term has also been variously defined, but two leading understandings have emerged. The first understanding, borrowed from secular anthropology, sees *worldview* as “the way people see or perceive the world, the way they ‘know’ it to be.”¹⁰ *Worldview* is a locally conditioned phenomenon, and as a result there are *many* interdependent worldviews.¹¹

Paul Hiebert, whom we may classify as largely in agreement with Hesselgrave on contextualization, narrows his definition a bit by defining *worldview* as “the basic assumptions about reality which lie beneath the beliefs and behavior of a culture.”¹² For Hiebert, *worldview* is more epistemologically basic than it is for Hesselgrave, focusing less on conditioning and more on philosophical presuppositions that precede knowledge. However, since these presuppositions include local pre-understandings, Hiebert still allows for multiple non-Christian and Christian worldviews.

⁸Ibid., p. 32.

⁹Hesselgrave, on the other hand, sees multiple “given cultures” that can be distinguished on linguistic, ethnic, social, and moral lines, but adds that these create a global “tapestry” or “mosaic.” He then adds that “culture is also this wholeness, this larger reality” (*Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally*, p. 195). Niebuhr intends only the latter explanation when using the term *culture*.

¹⁰*Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally*, p. 197. Hesselgrave borrows extensively from Robert Redfield, *The Primitive World and Its Transformation* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press), for his understanding.

¹¹For instance, Hesselgrave speaks of Taoist and Communist worldviews (*Communicating Christ Cross Culturally*, p. 153), the Tibetan Buddhist worldview (p. 157), etc. Arguably there are thousands of worldviews, for every historical people group possesses unique shades of preunderstanding that shade their thoughts and actions.

¹²Paul Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), p. 45.

Among writing presuppositionalist apologists, a second understanding of *worldview* has emerged. For Greg Bahnsen, *worldview* is more basic even than Hiebert's definition. There are *two* worldviews among humans, the Christian worldview (which produces Christian culture) and the non-Christian (pagan) worldview (which produces pagan culture). These two worldviews are on a "collision" trajectory because of one basic difference: "one submits to the authority of God's Word as a matter of presuppositional commitment and one does not."¹³ When Bahnsen uses the term *worldview*, local, geographic, and ethnic distinctions are not at issue. Instead, all non-Christians share common epistemological assumptions (pagan worldview/culture), and all Christians share common epistemological assumptions (Christian worldview/culture). The two are mutually exclusive of each other and diametrically opposed. This is a highly important point, because, if true, Bahnsen has significantly limited what Christians and non-Christians believe and think "in common"—in fact, he has denied the concept of theological common ground.

Niebuhr's Five Approaches of Christ to Culture

Since Niebuhr proposes a singular view of culture (and ostensibly of worldview as well),¹⁴ he would have disagreed with Bahnsen's claim that the Christian and pagan cultures are mutually exclusive categories. For Niebuhr, Christians are inevitably part of the *one* human culture. His five representative views of Christ to culture, in fact, are five positions that the church has taken at various points in its history toward the larger human culture *of which it is unavoidably a part*.¹⁵ There must be some level of "sharing" between the subculture and the larger culture, and Niebuhr's five approaches provide five historical understandings of how this "sharing" occurs: five approaches to understanding "common ground" within the noetic functions of the regenerate and

¹³*Always Ready: Directions for Defending the Faith*, ed. Robert R. Booth (Texarkana, AR: Covenant Media Foundation, 1996), p. 68. This "collision" terminology explains why Bahnsen and many of his followers have a postmillennial bent. Christ and culture are essentially at war, and eventually Christ will triumph over and redeem culture. I will argue below, however, that this position paradoxically undermines its own understanding of depravity. A better alternative to this approach is a premillennial presuppositionalism—one that culminates in the destruction of pagan culture and the recreation of a new, completely uncorrupted, regenerate culture.

¹⁴The singular "culture" in the title of his book itself gives this away. In Charles Scriven's words, Niebuhr has a "seemingly monolithic culture" (*The Transformation of Culture: Christian Social Ethics after H. Richard Niebuhr* [Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1988], p. 61).

¹⁵See esp. H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation* (New York: MacMillan, 1941), p. 36.

unregenerate within a mutual culture. His approaches are as follows:

- (1) Christ against culture: Culture is irreparably corrupt, and therefore to be avoided and even opposed by the church. The church should function as a counter culture, a “new and separated community”¹⁶ within culture (e.g., the Amish).
- (2) Christ and culture in paradox. Culture is irreparably corrupt but inescapable, and this paradox must be endured by the church (e.g., traditional Lutheranism).
- (3) Christ above culture: Culture is basically corrupt, but can be alternately subjugated and cultivated so that Christ’s higher ethic is eventually recognized and embraced by culture at large (e.g., Roman Catholicism and some expressions of the Magisterial Reformation).
- (4) Christ transforming culture. Culture is seriously damaged, but salvageable, and thus capable of ultimate redemption (e.g., Reformed Postmillennialism).
- (5) Christ of culture. Culture is good, and actually governs the religious expressions of the church (e.g., Protestant Liberalism).

In each of these five approaches, there is common ground. In (1) common ground is an illicit actuality; in (2) it is a necessary evil; in (3) it is a distasteful task; in (4) it is a restorative duty; and in (5) it is a welcome marriage. But in all five approaches, common ground is a reality, and, with the possible exception of (1), a reality that legitimates all attempts at contextualization.¹⁷

Scriven’s Critique of Niebuhr

In 1988 Charles Scriven raised two noteworthy criticisms of Niebuhr’s *Christ and Culture* in a book-length critique from an Anabaptist vantage.¹⁸ In the first of these criticisms, Scriven argues that Niebuhr’s categories are meaningless unless all share a common definition of *culture*. Though I am convinced that Niebuhr uses his definition of culture without equivocation, Scriven’s point must not be lost: the issue in question is not how culture is related to historicity (as Niebuhr

¹⁶Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, p. 72.

¹⁷Countercultural groups such as the Amish theoretically make no attempt to “contextualize.” Instead, they demand conformity by insisting that culture contextualize to them. However, as we note in the discussion of Scriven, below, they do concede at least a minimum of contextualization.

¹⁸*The Transformation of Culture: Christian Social Ethics after H. Richard Niebuhr* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1988).

claims),¹⁹ but how culture is related to depravity and the *imago dei*. In short, it asks whether culture is (1) basically good due to the predominance of the *imago dei* or (2) basically bad due to the predominance of depravity. With this in mind, Scriven suggests that Niebuhr asks the wrong questions when he emerges with his five approaches.

Scriven's second criticism of *Christ and Culture* is that it is impossible to find anyone who accepts precisely any one of Niebuhr's five positions. Instead, theologians tend to borrow from all five categories depending on the specific issue at hand. For instance, human language is a part of culture, yet no one takes an absolute "Christ against culture" stance against human language.²⁰ Likewise, a theologian who takes a "Christ against culture" view of music and entertainment, for instance, might take a "Christ of Culture" view of food or dress. In short, it is unlikely that anyone fits perfectly into any one of the five categories.

In one sense, Scriven's criticism seems a bit unwarranted, because Niebuhr admits at the outset of his work that his classifications are generalizations rather than absolute categories.²¹ However, Scriven has in another sense exposed an extraordinarily important detail: theologians tend practically to view various aspects of culture as being infected to a greater or lesser degree by the effects of human depravity. That is, culture has preserved some of God's designs reasonably intact (e.g., human language), while utterly corrupting others (e.g., human sexuality). As a result, when we contextualize, we tend to utilize cultural features that seem "less infected" by depravity while eschewing those that are "more infected."

All theologians, even those most radically "against culture," agree that there are some things that believers inescapably share with unbelievers (e.g., language, laws, clothing, etc.). The issue is not whether or not the Christian subculture sometimes resembles human culture, but

¹⁹Niebuhr ties all of culture, including its religious elements, to historical conditioning, a practice typical of the liberal tradition that Niebuhr never fully abandoned (see *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, s.v. "Niebuhr, Helmut Richard," by Mark A. Noll). Christianity is simply part of a historical, monolithic human culture. Orthodoxy (and neo-orthodoxy) denies this understanding, claiming that God intersects with human culture via revelation. Scriven argues the latter position, contra Niebuhr (*Transformation of Culture*, p. 61).

²⁰Some groups observe a form of "Christ Against Culture" with respect to a specific language or dialect (e.g., Roman Catholics who insist on Latin liturgies; KJV-only advocates who insist on Elizabethan English, etc.), but no one rejects human language completely—the Church, whether pragmatically or by design, is obliged to employ human language.

²¹*Christ and Culture*, p. 2; likewise, he praises aspects of all five approaches while apparently embracing the "Christ transforming culture" approach.

why this resemblance exists. Is the resemblance due to some parcel of neutral common ground (Christ of culture)? some terrible but necessary bit of pragmatism (Christ and culture in paradox)? some compromise on the part of Christians (Christ against culture)? Or, as this paper will suggest, some compromise on the part of *culture*?²²

Scriven thus informs us of the two great questions at stake: (1) whether or not culture is neutral, and (2) how to explain the incidental resemblance of Christ to culture. It is my contention that modern Christianity has in large measure assumed that culture is neutral in answer to question (1), and has then offered neutrality as the answer to question (2). As such, the modern church has become increasingly consumed with relevance and the identification of neutral aspects of culture, and is littered with “worship wars” over divisive contextualization issues such as music (e.g., what styles are neutral; what instruments [if any] are neutral; what media [hymnals, chorus books, PowerPoint projections, etc.] are neutral), appearance (e.g., what hair styles/length are neutral; what clothing is neutral; what jewelry is neutral), etc. I do not believe that these issues should go unaddressed; however, they can be properly addressed only after the more primary issue is addressed—whether or not there even *is* neutrality in culture. Niebuhr has assumed neutrality; as has Hesselgrave; but neither has successfully proved his case.

Stephen B. Bevans’s *Models of Contextual Theology*²³

A second and more recently updated summary of theological models of contextualization comes from a Roman Catholic writer, Stephen Bevans. In this volume he describes six such “models.” A true postmodernist, Bevans does not claim that any of the models is superior,²⁴ but he does offer helpful descriptions in his six approaches:

- (1) The Translation Model: Scripture is fixed, authoritative, and propositional truth that contains a supracultural message that must be

²²In Bahnsen’s terms, culture illicitly uses “borrowed capital” (*Always Ready*, pp. 52, 80), that is, it borrows for sake of convenience presuppositions from the Christian worldview in its use of language, logic, and a host of other shared customs. In short, in a pragmatic bid for survival, the world assumes the existence of God in order to function successfully enough to devise a way to eliminate God. Christ and culture resemble one another only because culture has pragmatically and temporarily chosen to resemble Christ.

²³Revised and expanded ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002).

²⁴For instance, on p. 139, Bevans writes, “There was a time when contextual theologians argued over whether one way of doing theology was the only way, but this kind of discussion has been recognized as futile.”

culturally “translated” for effectiveness.²⁵ It is at heart a rationalist model, though its evangelical view of Scripture adds some significant parameters to preclude describing it as purely rationalist.

- (2) The Anthropological Model: Scripture is one of many parallel sources of divine revelation. Its myths are accurate and applicable within their original context, but are disconnected from other cultures. Truth is relative to culture, and is sourced in humanity, which, for the model to work, must be innately good. Protestant liberalism fits here. It is rationalism without moorings.
- (3) The Praxis Model: Scripture is again one of many parallel expressions of divine revelation, but is the *prima inter pares* of revelation and becomes true when interfaced with culture and other sources of revelation in typically Hegelian fashion. Barth is the progenitor, and many expressions of neo-orthodoxy fit here. The model might be described as fideist.
- (4) The Synthetic Model: Scripture seems to be whatever the various cultures that read it want it to be. It does have limited authority, but not as canon. Instead, it is a collection of options that can be treated selectively by its respective readers, depending on what they relate best with. What is synthesized seems to be neo-orthodoxy and liberalism. As such, this model is alternately rationalistic and fideist.
- (5) The Transcendental Model: Scripture is the *prima inter pares* of revelational venues, but becomes true only as the reader touches the interface of transcendent and immanent. There is significant emphasis on “community” as the basis for determining what is true. There is a close resemblance to the praxis model here, though the transcendental model reflects more of the inroads of postmodernism. It also is essentially fideist.
- (6) The Countercultural Model: Scripture is absolute truth, but much of it defies contextualization. It has an innate ability, however, to penetrate every culture. The model might be called presuppositionalist.

In some senses a discussion of all six models is of little value to this paper, for only the first (the translation model) and last (the

²⁵The translation that occurs, Bevans notes, is most effective the more dynamic the translation is. Unfortunately, Bevans places no parameters on the dynamism, and concludes that the Bible is largely “the product of a culture and need[s] to be stripped down at every turn” (p. 35): what is left is the old “kernel of truth” in a cultural “husk.” Bevans identifies Hesselgrave as a proponent of the translation model, but criticizes him as too “conservative,” by which he apparently means that Hesselgrave buys the “implicit notion of revelation as propositional” (p. 37).

countercultural model) have evangelical expressions. Bevans's critiques of these two models, however, have significant value.

Bevans's Criticisms of the Translation Model

Bevans treats the translation model essentially as an outgrowth of Protestant Liberalism. While he may be partially correct on this latter point, he is not entirely correct. Thus his criticisms of the translation model are likewise not entirely correct.

Bevans's first criticism is that the translation model has a naïve notion of culture.²⁶ That is, it illegitimately tries to impose the Bible's culture on all of human culture.²⁷ This criticism basically intimates that the translation model is not liberal enough (recognizing all cultural norms as "good"), nor postmodern enough (recognizing all culture as "true" so long as it is self-consistent). To these criticisms adherents of the translation model would probably acquiesce, but not without qualification. Hesselgrave and Rommen, for instance, recognize many good or at least neutral aspects in culture, but would also recognize aspects of culture that need repair.²⁸ Ironically, conservative critics of the translation model charge the exact opposite of Bevans: that the translation model sees *too much* good in culture and *not enough* imposition of biblical culture on the world.²⁹ It is not the intent of this section of the paper to determine which of the three is correct—the translation model, its liberal critics, or its conservative critics—but to draw attention to the critical issue that divides them: the existence and extent of cultural neutrality.

Bevans adds to this criticism that the translation model has a naïve view of culture.³⁰ By this he explains that the translation model proposes a sort of "naked gospel" that is "supracultural" or

²⁶Ibid., pp. 43–44, 141.

²⁷For instance, Bevans considers the translation model's imposition of monogamy on polygamous cultures to be inappropriate (p. 43).

²⁸He notes, for instance that there are "two dangers in approaching the task of contextualization—the fear of irrelevance if contextualization is not attempted, and the fear of compromise and syncretism if it is taken too far. There is a need to use existing cultural forms that can be baptized and be pressed in the service of Christ if the Gospel is not denied in the process.... But since by definition contextualization appropriates indigenous linguistic and cultural forms, it always risks cultural and religious syncretism" (*Contextualization*, p. 55).

²⁹Carl F. H. Henry, "The Cultural Relativizing of Revelation," *Trinity Journal* 1 (Fall 1980): 153–64; Arthur Johnston, *The Battle for World Evangelism* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1978).

³⁰*Models of Contextual Theology*, pp. 43–44, 141

“supracontextual.”³¹ In literary terms, there must be an “original manuscript” from which to translate—a pure, culture-free expression of the gospel ready for translation. For Bevans, the only valid options are (1) a gospel that is “wholly other” and resistant to translation (neo-orthodoxy), and (2) a gospel that is a product of culture (liberalism). The former is supracultural but untranslatable; the latter is translatable, but not supracultural. The tension is a valid one, and will not be answered in this section. It is raised only to highlight the second major question surrounding contextualization: how to epistemologically explain the resemblance of Christ to culture, a question that Bevans implies has not been answered by adherents of the translation model.

Bevans’s third and final criticism of the translation model is that it has a “propositional notion of revelation.”³² Most evangelical adherents to the translation model would welcome this criticism as largely accurate, but would view this as a strength of the model rather than a weakness. Thus it merits little discussion.

Bevans’s Criticisms of the Countercultural Model

Bevans’s first edition of *Models of Contextual Theology*³³ did not include the countercultural model. The author offers no real reason for the addition,³⁴ but his description of the model as property of a litany of sectarian groups suggests he did not at first find the view unified enough to be a viable model. Additionally, the countercultural model is unique in its negative view of culture,³⁵ and might reasonably be dismissed as an “anti-contextual model.” Whatever Bevans’s reason for omitting this model in the first edition, however, we may be happy that he included it in the second, for it has been heavily represented in the history of the church.³⁶

Bevans’s description of this model begins in a fair way. It is not anti-cultural, Bevans notes, except in its most extreme forms. That is, even though adherents of the countercultural model recognize culture as being human and thus thoroughly depraved, do not “translate the

³¹Ibid., p. 43.

³²Ibid., pp. 44, 141.

³³Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1992.

³⁴See his explanation in *Models of Contextual Theology*, rev. and exp. ed., p. xvi.

³⁵Bevans offers summaries of the six models in *ibid.*, pp. 141–43. The synthetic model sees culture as “ambiguous and incomplete” (admittedly not positive, but not negative either). The countercultural model sees culture as “radically ambiguous and resistant to the gospel; unequal to scripture/tradition” (negative). The other four models view culture as “basically good and trustworthy” (positive).

³⁶Note, for instance, the long list of historical proponents in *ibid.*, p. 118.

gospel in terms of the context (as the translation model would do)...but truly encounter and engage the context,"³⁷ and do not ask rhetorically with Tertullian, "What has Jerusalem (Christ) to do with Athens (culture)?"³⁸ they still recognize the need to clothe the gospel in the language and symbols known to culture.³⁹ There is still contextualization that occurs, but its expression is heavily restricted.⁴⁰

Bevans's criticism of the countercultural model is less philosophical and more practical than are his criticisms of the other models. It takes the form of practical "cautions" rather than hard philosophical questions—cautions against "anticulturalism," irrelevance, isolationism, and monocultural exclusivism.⁴¹ In so doing, Bevans does not critique the model itself, but extreme and thus illegitimate expressions of the model. Far more helpful would have been a critique of the model itself, namely, a resurrection of the same burning questions raised above: (1) is culture neutral? (and, in distinction from all the other models, the countercultural model answers NO), and (2) why, then, is there a resemblance of Christ and culture? Few adherents of the countercultural model have attempted to answer the latter question.

Summary

Niebuhr and Bevans have both offered, in their respective volumes, options for contextualization. And in doing so, they have raised two theological/philosophical questions that must be answered by anyone who proposes to contextualize his theology: (1) is culture neutral? and (2) what accounts for the resemblance between Christ and culture?

³⁷Ibid., p. 119.

³⁸Note the appropriately titled compendium on VanTilian apologetics: *Jerusalem and Athens: Critical Discussions of the Philosophy and Apologetics of Cornelius Van Til*, ed. E. R. Geehan (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1977).

³⁹Ibid., pp. 118–19.

⁴⁰It is important to note here that Bevans's countercultural model is broader than any evangelical would care to accept. He includes in it not only presuppositionalist confessionalists and Protestant sectarian groups (e.g., the Amish, various Brethren groups and other Anabaptist sects), but also Monastics, Catholic sects, and sundry incarnational communities. Incarnation theology seems particularly unnerving as a representative of the countercultural model: as Arthur Johnston's important work *The Battle for World Evangelism* suggests, the Barthian roots of incarnation theology make it highly suspect, and legitimately renders it a representative of Bevans's praxis, synthetic, or transcendental models more than a representative of his countercultural model. It is sufficient to say that there are several radically independent representatives of the countercultural model with nothing in common save some level of distrust for culture.

⁴¹*Models of Contextual Theology*, pp. 125–27.

The following sections will address these questions.

THE QUESTION OF NEUTRALITY

As we noted in the previous section, with the exception of the countercultural model, there is a general assumption that culture is neutral, and either independent of or essentially in harmony with God: just as man retains the image of God in microcosm, so also culture retains the image of God in macrocosm. As such, culture possesses aspects and attributes that escape, to a large extent, the effects of depravity. The Christian response to culture is merely to bridle various aspects of culture and employ them for their divinely intended end—glory to God.

This assumption, however, has not gone unchallenged. To summarize, the challenge to this assumption is that cultural neutrality is a myth and culture is hostile toward God: just as man is individually depraved in microcosm, so also culture is corporately depraved in macrocosm. Culture possesses no aspect that escapes the effects of depravity, even though it has occasionally borrowed (illicitly) from the Christian worldview.⁴² The proper response of the Christian to culture is to expose its depravity, demonstrate that it has illicitly borrowed from the Christian worldview, and show that its adherents cannot live with the implications of their own worldview.⁴³

It is the intent of this section to demonstrate that the concept of cultural neutrality is a myth,⁴⁴ and in doing so, lay the groundwork for the claim that Christ may not borrow anything from culture, because culture has nothing to offer Christ.

Defining Religious Non-Neutrality

Claiming that religious neutrality in culture is a myth is not an

⁴²See n. 22, above.

⁴³Described here as the Christian's task is what is commonly known as the "transcendental argument." Stated positively, the transcendental argument shows that "only the Christian worldview provides the philosophical preconditions necessary for man's reasoning and knowledge in any field whatever.... Upon analysis, all truth drives one to Christ. From beginning to end, man's reasoning about anything whatsoever (even reasoning about reasoning itself) is unintelligible or incoherent unless the truth of the Christian Scriptures is presupposed" (Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic*, pp. 5–6; see also pp. 497–529). For further explication of the transcendental method of argument see Herman Dooyeweerd, *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought*, 4 vols., trans. David H. Freeman and William S. Young (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1953).

⁴⁴I borrow this term and much of the thought in this chapter from Roy Clouser, *The Myth of Religious Neutrality* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991).

easy thing, because people tend to live in a world of sense experience rather than in a world of ideas. Denial of religious neutrality in culture conjures up in many minds the idea that “we speak our native tongue or add a column of figures differently because of our religion.”⁴⁵ But this is not the case. It is an undeniable fact that the regenerate and unregenerate share common sense experiences; they share common languages; they share common “laws” in all the academic disciplines; they even share common moral codes. But what differs is the *interpretation* and *basis* of these common experiences and practices: the “theories of philosophy and the sciences [by which] we try to explain all that we experience.”⁴⁶ The claim of religious non-neutrality, Clouser continues, is that “one religious belief or another controls theory making in such a way that the contents of the theories differ depending on the contents of the religious belief they presuppose.”⁴⁷

Clouser begins his discussion by defining “religious.” A full chapter is dedicated to this definition,⁴⁸ and his whole discussion certainly cannot be reproduced in its entirety in this brief paper. In summary, Clouser defines as “religious” any thing or idea that depends ultimately on something (or someone) self-existent and non-dependent for its existence and meaning.⁴⁹

Clouser continues in chapter 4 to define what a *theory* is. Simply put, a theory is “any account, interpretation, or aid to understanding.”⁵⁰ It is an explanation for what *is*. Clouser goes on to demonstrate that there are multiple levels of theories, many of which are mundane, everyday tasks. He gives special attention, however, to a special class of theories, namely, “general theories of knowledge” (epistemology) and “general theories of reality” (ontology). These theories are critical because (1) they are the most overtly religious of all theories, and because (2) they govern all other theories. In Clouser’s own words, “When a philosopher theorizes about math, physics, logic, or ethics, it is not simply an intrusion into the domain of a science because it is done by bringing the results of a general theory of reality or knowledge to the study of those specific aspects.”⁵¹

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 2.

⁴⁶Ibid.

⁴⁷Ibid., p. 3.

⁴⁸Ibid., chap. 2.

⁴⁹Note especially Clouser’s summary in *ibid.*, pp. 21–22.

⁵⁰Ibid., p. 52.

⁵¹Ibid., p. 61. The “aspects” to which Clouser refers are fiduciary, ethical, judicial, aesthetic, economic, social, linguistic, historical, logical, sensory, biological, physical, kinematic, spatial, and quantitative elements of human experience (pp. 56–57).

Assuming Clouser's definitions, one must conclude that all people have some sort of a "religious" system that governs their existence, whether or not they have consciously thought about and identified that system. They may never have given a great deal of thought as to why they use human language, employ laws of logic, create moral codes, or even do various mundane things such as eat food or wear clothing, but it is inevitable that people ultimately do all these things for "religious" reasons. These "reasons" take the form of divinities, and are manifold: some acknowledge the divinity of physical matter; others the divinity of natural law, others the divinity of numbers, and still others more traditional, personal divinities such independent members of a pantheon, Islam's Allah, or the biblical God.⁵² However, it is clear, assuming Clouser's definitions, that there can be no such thing as religious neutrality.⁵³

Religious Non-Neutrality and the Exclusiveness of Knowledge

Much of the rest of Clouser's book is dedicated not to debunking the myth of religious neutrality, but something more significant, namely, that the Christian worldview is the only religious system that successfully and self-consistently provides a basis for our experiences and actions. He does this by asking the transcendental question, "What makes theories possible?" of a variety of academic disciplines,⁵⁴ and then answering the question consistently: only a theistic system that presupposes Yahweh the Creator God, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who has revealed himself inerrantly in the Protestant canon.

This answer significantly tightens the parameters of the argument. It goes beyond saying that every thought and activity in culture is founded upon religious presuppositions to say that all thoughts and activities in culture that are not founded on the "general theories of reality and knowledge" espoused in the Christian Scriptures are *wrong* because they are ill-founded and ill-motivated. This claim to exclusiveness is readily apparent in Scripture.

⁵²In my capitalization/non-capitalization of god, I am following Clouser's distinction of "gods" as religious entities that receive worship regardless of whether they are self-existent and non-dependent and "God" as *divinity*: a religious entity that is self-existent and non-dependent regardless of whether he is worshiped (*ibid.*, p. 22).

⁵³Note also the highly instructive essay, "God and the Absolute," in Cornelius Van Til, *Christianity and Idealism* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1955).

⁵⁴He dedicates separate chapters, for instance, to the discovery of biblical theories of mathematics, physics, psychology, reality, and the state.

Proverbs 1:7

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction.⁵⁵

When man fell in Genesis 3, his intent was intellectual autonomy: he wanted to be able to “know” and to make moral determinations without the restrictive impositions of God.⁵⁶ By doing so, he strove to remove what Proverbs 1:7 describes as the very basis for all truth—willing acquiescence to the sovereign authority of God and to the truth claims of Christianity.⁵⁷ The verse moves a step beyond the fear of the Lord as the beginning of *wisdom* (i.e., the application of knowledge) that occurs elsewhere in Scripture (Prov 9:10; Ps 111:10) to include the very knowledge upon which wisdom is based. As such, as Gerhard von Rad notes, Proverbs 1:7 “contains in a nutshell the whole Israelite theory of knowledge.”⁵⁸ It is an epistemological statement that “all human knowledge comes back to the question about commitment to God.”⁵⁹

The natural rebuttal to this statement is the plain fact that some unregenerate people possess and utilize truth as effectively as and even more effectively than do believers. The response to this rebuttal is sagely offered by Peter Craigie, who writes, “Many profound moral systems collapse, not from lack of *substance*, but from lack of *foundation* or *authority*. Hebrew moral wisdom presupposes the existence of God, which in turn gives the whole system coherence, authority, and integrity.”⁶⁰ As such, there exists a built-in check on the expression of

⁵⁵Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture citations are taken from the NASB, 1995 updated edition.

⁵⁶For this understanding I am particularly indebted to E. J. Young, *Genesis 3* (London: Banner of Truth, 1966), pp. 25–45.

⁵⁷By using the phrase “fear of the Lord” in this verse, the author intends not terror or fleeting reverence, but, in Bruce Waltke’s words, “a lifetime stance of submission in reverent awe” (“The Book of Proverbs and Old Testament Theology,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 136 [October–December 1979]: 312; see also Roland E. Murphy, “Excursus on Fear of the Lord,” in *Proverbs*, Word Biblical Commentary [Nashville: Nelson, 1998], pp. 254–58). In Deuteronomy 10:12–13 the “fear of the Lord” is set in parallel with “walking in all his ways...loving him...serving the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul...and keeping the Lord’s commandments and his statutes.” It thus serves as an OT synonym for faith (cf. Luke 10:25–28).

⁵⁸*Wisdom in Israel* (London: SCM, 1972), p. 67.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*

⁶⁰“Biblical Wisdom in the Modern World: I. Proverbs,” *Crux* 15 (December 1979), p. 8, emphasis added; see also John E. Johnson, “An Analysis of Proverbs 1:1–7,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 144 (October–December 1987): 430. I would contend that it is not only “moral systems” that collapse, but all intellectual systems as well. Since the

man's "despising" of true wisdom and knowledge. The fool, that is, the one who tries to establish his own autonomy in the face of God's sovereignty, pragmatically employs a measure of wisdom and knowledge for his own survival, all the while despising it. He possesses knowledge, but does so illegitimately: the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge.

Colossians 2:3, 8; Ephesians 4:17–21

In [Christ] are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.... See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ.

The Gentiles live in the futility of their thinking. They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts. You, however, did not come to know Christ that way. Surely you heard of him and were taught in him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus.

These passages state again in positive terms that knowledge (in fact, *all* knowledge) is sourced in Jesus Christ and is accessible only through a faith relationship with him. And, just as we saw in Proverbs, Paul raises the antithesis—the traditions of men and the rudimentary principles of the world⁶¹—and dismisses these as "empty," "dark," and "futile." There is no neutrality in the condition of the world, and the only solution to the problem, we find as we read on in Ephesians 4, is

unregenerate man possesses no faith, he has no valid foundation for a genuine truth system.

⁶¹The understanding of "rudimentary principles" (τά στοιχεῖα) has been heavily debated. Homer Kent, following the usage of the same phrase in Galatians 4:3, connects the phrase specifically to the Jewish ceremonies that represented a pre-Christian and thus incomplete theological expression that threatened to enslave the recipients of the Colossian epistles (*Treasures of Wisdom and Knowledge: Studies in Colossians and Philemon* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979], p. 82; so also F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984], pp. 99–100); however, since the Colossian heresy included more than Jewish elements, and since the term seems to be governed in context by the heading "philosophy," it seems best to take τά στοιχεῖα as a reference to the "divinities" (see *supra*, n. 52) that underlay the heretical Colossian philosophy, whether these be angelic beings or the Greek cosmic elements of air, water, fire, and earth (So Peter T. O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, Word Biblical Commentary [Waco, TX: Word, 1982], pp. 129–32); Murray J. Harris, *Colossians & Philemon* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991], p. 93; James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, New International Greek Testament Commentary [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996], pp. 148–51). As such they represent basic ontological and epistemological features of the Colossian philosophy.

to don the “new self.”⁶²

Again, the objection rises that this condition does not seem to correspond to reality. The pool of the unregenerate produces, in fact, some profound thinkers. This fact, however, is denied neither by this passage nor by the presuppositionalists who use these passages to support their apologetic methodology. Van Til, for instance, notes that “they of whom Scripture says that their minds are darkened can yet discover much truth.”⁶³ What these “elements of truth” lack, however, is connection with a truth *system* or truth *standard*.⁶⁴ God in his common grace restrains the mind of the unregenerate, and denies him the ability to absolutely deny the existence and standards of God even though they do so “in principle.”⁶⁵ That is, even though unregenerate man posits his own autonomy in theory, God never allows him to do so in actuality. He continues to borrow illicitly from the Christian worldview, and thus is enabled to possess genuine truth. But even though he possesses truth, he cannot “by his own criteria” possess this truth with any *certainty* that it is true.⁶⁶

Romans 1:18–21, 25

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. For since the creation of the world his invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse. For even though they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened.... For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator.

This final passage has likewise been selected to demonstrate the relationship of the unregenerate to the possession of knowledge. As in the previous passages, we note that the epistemological foundation for the unregenerate is innate, or “evident within them.” So it would be foolish to suggest that the unregenerate have no knowledge. It is precisely their response to this knowledge that is at issue—they suppress it; they exchange the truth for a lie by exchanging the true Deity for one of their own making. They exchange their presuppositions, an

⁶²See esp. Greg Bahnsen, *Always Ready*, pp. 3–9.

⁶³*A Christian Theory of Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1969), p. 44.

⁶⁴*Ibid.*, p. 43.

⁶⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 43–44.

⁶⁶Van Til, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge*, p. 43.

action which, ironically, is dependent upon the God that is exchanged.

Religious Non-Neutrality and the Exclusiveness of Righteousness

If indeed noetic neutrality is a myth, which the texts above seem to suggest, then there is nothing in culture that may be detached from one's ontological presuppositions about divinity. This conclusion extends to every facet of society: its laws, its literary forms, its architecture, its music, and, of course, its cultus. There are in this world but two classes of thought, expression, and activity—evil and good—there is no substantive correspondence between the two, even when they resemble one another. Consider the following:

Isaiah 64:5–6

You meet him who rejoices in doing righteousness, who remembers you in your ways. Behold, you were angry, for we sinned, we continued in them a long time; and shall we be saved? All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment.

These verses are perplexing for their enigmatic nature, and present a difficult interpretive task. In these verses we find something described as “righteous” yet also as having negative value; something good, yet bearing only a superficial correspondence to what is good.

Specifically, we observe members of God's chosen nation expressing confidence that God would “meet them” in righteousness. Some of the nation were apostate and did not even attempt to act righteously, but others exhibited a modicum of righteousness, “form of godliness while denying its power” (2 Tim 3:5). Their deeds were righteous (יָדָהּ) in that they conformed externally to the standards imposed by God and exemplified in the person of God.⁶⁷ However, since they lacked God's regenerating work, their deeds could not be considered *truly* righteous—righteousness that could mollify God or be meritorious so that he would “meet them.”⁶⁸ The only correspondence between the righteous deeds that the unregenerate perform and the righteous deeds that the regenerate perform is in the realm of *form* and not of *substance*.

⁶⁷The lexicons uniformly understand the term to denote loyalty to the covenant stipulations as prescribed by the laws and exemplified in the character of God (BDB, s.v. יָדָהּ, p. 842; *HALOT*, study ed., s.v. יָדָהּ, 2:1005).

⁶⁸See esp. the discussion in John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah Chapter 40–66*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), pp. 620–27.

Matthew 23

The NT describes a situation similar to Isaiah 64:5–6 when it describes the Pharisees of Jesus' day. In one of the more perplexing chapters of the Gospels, Matthew 23, we find the Pharisees sitting in the seat of Moses prescribing proper, orthodox behavior for the nation—things that the hearers ought to “do and observe” (v. 3).⁶⁹ Christ further describes the Pharisees as meticulous doers of the Law, doing things that they “should not have neglected” (v. 23). In the immediate context of these verses, however, we see Christ level six woes on this group, call them hypocrites seven times, blind five times, also, fools, greedy, self-indulgent, wicked, snakes, murderers, and sons of hell.

Apparently the Pharisees in Matthew 23 had an appearance of righteousness, much like the Israelites of Isaiah 64, that is, the activities that they did outwardly corresponded to the obedience required in the Mosaic Law. But in the final analysis, there was no substantive correspondence between the righteousness of the Pharisees and true righteousness. Thus Christ enjoined his hearers to do *what* the Pharisees say, but not *as* they do (v. 3a), because they sometimes did not do what they say (v. 3b), and even when they did what they said, their actions were ill-motivated (vv. 5–7, 27–28; cf. 6:5).

Proverbs 21:4 (NKJV)

A haughty look, a proud heart, and the plowing of the wicked are sin.

This verse has been reserved for last in this section because it contains a significant textual problem;⁷⁰ however, if the translation reads as it stands, it provides significant evidence for the point at hand. In it

⁶⁹Some commentators note this enigma and suggest that this phrase is an ironic comment that was not intended prescriptively (e.g., D. A. Carson, “Matthew,” in vol. 8 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984], pp. 473–74). A straightforward reading of the passage, however, does not seem to yield the ironic flavor that Carson suggests. It seems more likely that Christ was commending the Pharisees' teaching, and to a lesser degree even some of their actions (vv. 5, 23, 28). See Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), p. 540; Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), p. 573.

⁷⁰Most modern translations (NASB, NIV, ESV, NRSV) follow the LXX in translating לַמִּשְׁעָה as the “lamp of the wicked,” a translation that *may* require an emendation of the Hebrew vowel points from לַ to לֵ (see esp. Peter A. Steveson, *Proverbs* [Greenville, SC: Bob Jones University Press, 2001], p. 284). I say *may* because the interplay between the hîreq and serê is well attested in the evolution of classical Hebrew. However, when the phrase appears elsewhere in Proverbs to clearly denote the “lamp of the wicked” (13:9; 20:20, 24:20), the phrase לַמִּשְׁעָה is used, giving credence to the understanding that לַמִּשְׁעָה means something else, namely, the “plowing of the wicked” (so KJV, NKJV, NET, CEV, poss. NLT).

we find that a task as mundane and solitary as plowing a field is wicked when done by the unregenerate.⁷¹ There is no neutrality even in fulfilling the dominion mandate to subdue the earth—when performed by the wicked, even this is sin.

Summary

All theories of knowledge that are not connected to the presupposition of the existence and sovereign exclusiveness of the God of the Bible are wrong, and right behavior not connected to epistemology and ontology native to the regenerate is sin. That is not to say that unbelievers lack the *imago dei*, can do nothing that corresponds to God's standards of righteous activity, or cannot effectively use the natural resources at their disposal as the result of common grace.⁷² Nor is it to say that such common thoughts and activities are such that they preclude meaningful interaction and resource sharing between the regenerate and the unregenerate.⁷³ However, it does imply that there are certain restrictions in identifying such commonalities as *theological* common ground. It is to this topic that the next section turns.

IMPLICATIONS OF RELIGIOUS NON-NEUTRALITY FOR VARIOUS FEATURES OF CONTEMPORARY CONTEXTUALIZATION

While the preceding sections certainly leave a theological basis for a positive expression of contextualization, there are also certain features of contextualization precluded. Prior to laying out a positive model for contextualization in the following section, this section will discuss these preclusions under three headings.

⁷¹If we follow the “lamp of the wicked” the meaning may not be far different, though it is perhaps not as stark: the lamp of the wicked is symbolic of the wicked man's existence (see 13:9; 20:20; 24:20; Job 21:17) that will be snuffed out because the very existence of the wicked is sin (21:4). It logically follows that every aspect of his existence is sinful as well.

⁷²It is beyond the pale of this paper to deal with all the intricacies of common grace. I personally recommend Cornelius Van Til's *Common Grace and the Gospel* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1974); John Murray, “Common Grace,” in *The Collected Writings of John Murray*, 4 vols. (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1972–82), 2:93–119. For a more recent treatment that “attempts to give Dutch Reformed deliberations about common grace some broader ecumenical exposure” see Richard J. Mouw, *He Shines in All That's Fair* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), p. 8.

⁷³Such would seem to be the case among those of the Protestant Reformed Churches associated with Herman Hoeksema and united by the *Standard Bearer* magazine, but is not defended here.

The Feature of Noetic Correspondence

During the 1940s and 1950s, a movement emerged from fundamentalism that sought to render the gospel rationally defensible and intellectually attractive to the enemies of the gospel. Several theologians represented this apologetic tradition (Edward Carnell, Carl Henry, Bernard Ramm, and later Ronald Nash and Millard Erickson), but the primordial seed is generally understood to be Gordon Clark.

In Clark's *Christian View of Men and Things*, he laid out an apologetic that at first glance seems quite presuppositionalist, a label which he embraced early in his career. For instance, he argued that basic truth axioms are indemonstrable and impossible to prove: "What about these assumptions or axioms? Can they be proved? It would seem that they cannot, for they are the starting points of an argument, and if the argument starts with them, there is no preceding argumentation."⁷⁴ However, having improvable presuppositions does not make one a transcendental presuppositionalist. As Clark aptly demonstrated, all men have presuppositions, even rationalists and empiricists.⁷⁵ What is at issue is the specific presupposition that Clark embraced. A few select statements will suffice to demonstrate that it was not an inerrant Bible. Clark states, "There is no method of understanding superior to deduction";⁷⁶ "Strange accidents do indeed occur, and no proof is forthcoming that the Bible is not such an accident. Unlikely perhaps, but still possible";⁷⁷ "The important question is not whether or not the Bible is true, but whether or not all knowledge is deducible by reason, i.e., by logic alone."⁷⁸

These statements and specifically Clark's introductory chapter to *A Christian View of Men and Things* reveal that his basic presupposition was logic, and more specifically, the law of non-contradiction.⁷⁹ That is, one concludes the truth of any event or statement by demonstrating logically that it contradicts neither "reality" nor itself. This logic, part

⁷⁴Gordon H. Clark, *A Christian View of Men and Things* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), p. 29.

⁷⁵Ibid.

⁷⁶Gordon H. Clark, "Secular Philosophy (Wheaton Lecture I)," in *The Philosophy of Gordon H. Clark*, ed. Ronald H. Nash (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1968), p. 27.

⁷⁷Gordon H. Clark, "How May I Know the Bible Is Inspired?" in *Can I Trust My Bible?* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1963), p. 24.

⁷⁸For an expanded list of rationalist comments made by Clark, see Greg L. Bahnsen's *Van Til's Apologetic: Readings & Analysis* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1998), pp. 669–70.

⁷⁹*Christian View*, pp. 26–34.

of the *imago dei*, shines through the “sluggish”⁸⁰ reasoning capabilities of depraved man and causes him to apply this law of non-contradiction to “choose the more promising first principle” from among other systems that are self-contradictory.⁸¹ This accumulated knowledge “is faith,”⁸² an inductive platform from which the inductive leap to the truth of God’s propositional revelation in Scripture may be made.

Clark would no doubt cringe at the term “leap” because of its neo-orthodox overtones, but there seems to be no better way to describe it.⁸³ He has already noted that reason and the accumulation of brute facts do not prove truth absolutely, but merely point inductively to a “more promising first principle.” Since Scripture has no observable self-contradictions, it is very probably true, but can never be absolutely proven, because all possible contradictions could not possibly be known simultaneously. One might concede for argument’s sake that Clark’s gap between “promising” and “true” has been narrowed by a mountain of evidence, but the gap still requires an unwarranted leap of faith, no matter how small.

In 1945, Cornelius Van Til, along with eleven other presbyters attempted to block Clark’s ordination to the Presbytery of Philadelphia.⁸⁴ Several issues were mentioned in the debate, but the focus of the *Complaint* was upon the incomprehensibility of God and the relation of God’s epistemology to man’s. First, Van Til maintained that Clark viewed God as essentially the same as man—a composite of propositions.⁸⁵ The only difference was that God’s complex of propositions is *quantitatively* greater than man’s. Thus God is reduced to the

⁸⁰“The Bible as Truth,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 114 (April 1957): 157–70.

⁸¹*Christian View*, p. 34, cf. p. 235.

⁸²*Ibid.*, p. 324.

⁸³His comments seem, in fact, to validate Millard Erickson’s warning in 1968 that the New Evangelicalism “has been moving in the general direction of neo-orthodoxy” in view of its more subjective view of revelation (*The New Evangelical Theology* [Westwood, NJ: Revell, 1968], p. 226).

⁸⁴Van Til’s own *Doctrine of Scripture* (Ripon, CA: den Delk Christian Foundation, 1967), pp. 62–72, succinctly summarizes the controversy from a Van Tilian perspective. For a defense of Clark’s position see Herman Hoeksema’s *The Clark-Van Til Controversy* (reprint of 1945 ed., Jefferson, MD: Trinity Foundation, 1995). For an attempt at resolution from a “balanced perspective,” see John Frame’s *Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1995), pp. 97–113.

⁸⁵While Clark denied this charge in 1945, his later writings support Van Til’s charge. In his *The Trinity* (Jefferson, MD: Trinity Foundation, 1985), p. 106, Clark maintains that the definition of a person, that is, a “composite of propositions...will fail if it does not apply to God.”

level of man, and it is only time and education that separates man from ontologically becoming God.

Second, Van Til maintained that Clark's alleged fideism left him with irrational truth claims. Specifically, man begins with no truth at all and sees God's revelation as one option among many. Faced with these many options, man whittles away the less likely options, until he is left with the most likely (though never certain) option, which he embraces with a leap of faith.⁸⁶ Van Til, on the other hand, maintained that unregenerate man does possess truth, but he willfully suppresses it, and, when he does grudgingly use it, he divorces it from its source and fashions it into a *qualitatively* different "truth" of his liking.

The practical ramifications of these conflicting views were significant. For Van Til, evangelism consisted in proclaiming truth in connection with its source (God and the Scriptures), arguing transcendently, when necessary, against false "truth" systems by demonstrating that they borrow illicitly from the Christian worldview. For Clark and those in his train, however, evangelism increasingly began to take the form of an intellectual or social process that attempted to make Christian truth more empirically or rationally attractive than non-Christian alternatives.

If religious neutrality and noetic correspondence between the regenerate and unregenerate may be affirmed, then Clark is exonerated in his approach; if religious neutrality is rejected, however, Van Til's approach prevails. In view of the foregoing sections of this paper, the latter seems to be vindicated. One is also struck by Paul's injunctions in 1 Corinthians 1:18–2:5 as a vindication of Van Til's method:

For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the cleverness of the clever I will set aside." Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not come to know God, God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe. For indeed Jews ask for signs and Greeks search for wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. For consider your calling, brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty,

⁸⁶Clark would no doubt balk at this blatantly Arminian portrait of his view of faith and regeneration; however, the words on p. 34 of his *Christian View of Men and Things* render this the only logical description of Clark's apologetic methodology and soteriology.

not many noble; but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, and the base things of the world and the despised God has chosen, the things that are not, so that he may nullify the things that are, so that no man may boast before God. But by his doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption, so that, just as it is written, "Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord." And when I came to you, brethren, I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God. For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified. I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling, and my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith would not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God.

The Feature of Formulaic Effectiveness

As one reads through modern works on contextualization, he is immediately struck by the impression that many of the authors believe that contextualization heightens the likelihood of a positive response to the gospel. In a sense this is true. If an evangelist cannot gain a hearing for the Word of God, for instance, because he cannot speak a language or because he bumbles about needlessly offending his potential audience,⁸⁷ he will never have opportunity to announce the Word of God that the Spirit mixes with a faith imparted to make the hearers wise unto salvation.

However, in another sense this is not true. Means may be effective in drawing a crowd and even in garnering a positive appraisal of Christians in general, but they can never increase the likelihood that the hearers will embrace the gospel. In fact, in keeping with the truth of Romans 1, the unaided human mind will consistently exchange the gospel for some alternative to its truth that is more palatable: faced with the resurrection of Christ, an alternative explanation was circulated that persists to this day (Matt 18:11–15); faced with the witness of a man who had seen Sheol, unbelievers would scoff (Luke 16:31);⁸⁸ faced with Christ's astonishing miracles of feeding, the hearers responded favorably only to get free handouts (John 6:26);⁸⁹ faced with

⁸⁷By "offense" I do not mean a theological stumblingblock by which the gospel inherently necessarily offends the unregenerate. This can never be avoided, and any attempt to do so by altering the gospel is detestable.

⁸⁸The implication of this verse, in fact, is that the plain Scriptures are more likely to elicit a response than a voice from the dead.

⁸⁹I am aware that the function of Christ's miracles was not directly evangelistic. However, miracles were designed to authenticate Christ's Messiahship, which in turn

the miracles of tongues, the hearers concluded that the disciples were drunk (Acts 2:13); faced with miracles of healing, Simon responded favorably only in hope of receiving magical power (Acts 8:13–24); faced with miracles on another occasion, the hearers concluded that Paul and Barnabas were Greek gods (Acts 14:13).

The effectiveness of the gospel is not tied to the winsomeness of the presentation, but to the regenerative activity of God in conjunction with his Word. No amount of contextualization can ensure that God will regenerate or even increase the likelihood of God's regenerating work.⁹⁰

The Feature of Iconic Correspondence

Perhaps the most troubling feature of some evangelical expressions of the "translation model" of contextualization is what might be labeled iconic correspondence. By this I mean the tendency to identify elements of pagan cultus as corresponding in some way to the Christian cultus. It has long been commonplace among liberal and post-modern pluralists to *equate* pagan expressions with Christian ones (e.g., Allah is the God of the Bible; Nirvana is another name for heaven; the Catholic Eucharist, the Protestant Lord's Supper, and the Jewish Passover are really one and the same; etc.). A true evangelical will not make such statements, but some come uncomfortably close when they identify individual points of commonality between the cultic elements of diverse faiths.

Many examples of this tendency could be cited, but rather than treat multiple examples in a cursory way, I will single out one example and treat it thoroughly. In 1992, D. A. Carson edited a book on the contextualization of justification, a work with mixed value. In one of the articles, Chris Marantika offers his thoughts on justification in a Muslim context wherein he makes some troubling concessions.⁹¹ He

should have led to a wholesale repentance and acceptance of Christ and his kingdom offer, so they were at least indirectly evangelistic (cf. also John 20:30). However, because of the noetic effects of sin, the hearers, unaided by the regenerative work of the Holy Spirit, consistently came to incorrect conclusions about the person and message of Christ.

⁹⁰Even the miracles of Christ could not penetrate this barrier (John 10:25, 38). It is for this reason that he refused at times to give signs (Matt 12:38ff; 16:1–4) and dramatically scaled back the performance of miracles toward the end of his ministry (John 6:30–40)—they could not and would not follow him based on signs and miracles alone. They had neither eyes to see nor ears to hear that they might understand and respond to Christ's message.

⁹¹Chris Marantika, "Justification by Faith: Its Relevance in Islamic Context," in *Right with God: Justification in the Bible and the World* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), pp. 228–42.

begins by noting that there is significant similarity between the Muslim and Christian concepts of sovereignty and predestination, and suggests that a good evangelistic approach will “greatly emphasise” these issues because of the correspondence of these ideas between the two faiths—they are a “point of contact [that] should invite curiosity.”⁹² Both faiths also see God as merciful and gracious, another point singled out for “strong emphasis.”⁹³ He adds that both gods are holy, and in both systems man’s sin stands in the way of a personal relationship between the God and man.⁹⁴ Emphasis here, Marantika claims, will “break through the mentality of the Muslim,” and “prepare the way for a clear understanding of the message of Christ as Saviour.”⁹⁵ A summary of his position is summed up in the following statement which he cites and endorses: “Acknowledging those elements which are similar in both religions is an honest approach. One can communicate the Gospel by beginning with elements of Christianity known to the Muslim, and going from there to the presentation of the Gospel and its challenge to accept Christ as Saviour and Lord.”⁹⁶

Marantika continues by noting that both religions believe in faith, though the object of faith differs between Christians and Muslims.⁹⁷ Upon shifting the object of one’s faith from one’s own works to Jesus Christ, however, “compensation...should be provided in order that after accepting this standing before God, the new Muslim convert can have a grip on something that is not too far from his or her past religious practices, such as set praying for three times a day (rather than the usual Muslim practice of five times a day).”⁹⁸

Because of the Muslim view of the person of Christ, there is a significant hurdle in establishing “how the great grace of God in Christ can be understood and accepted by the Islamic mind.”⁹⁹ Since this is a sharp difference between Christianity and Islam, the process is not easy. However, as Marantika notes, there are still some similarities: Christ’s birth was accompanied by angels (one of the six tenets of

⁹²Ibid., pp. 232, 233.

⁹³Ibid., p. 233. Admittedly, Marantika cautions that the Muslim idea of mercy lacks the immanence of the Christian idea, but this problem does not stand in the way of a “strong emphasis” of the commonalities of mercy between Christianity and Islam.

⁹⁴Ibid., p. 234.

⁹⁵Ibid.

⁹⁶Ibid., pp. 233–34, cited from Bong Rin Ro and Ruth Eshenaur, eds., *The Bible and Theology in Context* (Taiwan: ATA, 1984), p. 377.

⁹⁷Ibid., p. 235.

⁹⁸Ibid.

⁹⁹Ibid.

Islam) and “much emphasis” here will soften the differences: “An accurate exposition of what the angels said about Christ in the Gospels will make the message of justification by faith more desirable.”¹⁰⁰ Further, in describing Christ’s mission, “the Qur’an seems to come quite close to the biblical truth.”¹⁰¹ Other “points of agreement” that “appeal to the mindset of many Muslims” include Christ as *Logos*, the “light of the world” and the conquering “Word of God.”¹⁰² Muslims even have the doctrine of “Jesus the Messiah as Man” that can explain the various miracles associated with the life of Christ.¹⁰³

The idea of personal sin and hell are likewise vivid for the Muslim, and Marantika gives a careful list of types of sin that are particularly suited for Muslims in “building bridges and preparing the way for the Muslim to accept the message of salvation in Christ.”¹⁰⁴ In fact, this is a very important area, because “they are frequently conscious of their personal sins...their failing to conform to the character of God.... Their hearts cry for deliverance. Traditional religion has not given them the answer. They are waiting for the solution.”¹⁰⁵ The remedy for sin, repentance and forgiveness, is also understood well in Islam.¹⁰⁶

However, there are some points of difference that cannot be denied. One of these is the Trinity and the concept of Jesus as God yet Son of God, a concept that “will not unlock the mind-set of the Muslims to the gospel.” Marantika’s solution? “The presentation of these truths should be delayed.”¹⁰⁷ Original sin is also foreign to the Muslim mind, so “discussion of this should be delayed to later times of encounter, possibly after conversion.” After all, “sin is sin, a rebellion against God, whether it is understood as original sin or personal sin...and in the presentation of the gospel in a Muslim context, the

¹⁰⁰Ibid., p. 236.

¹⁰¹Ibid, pp. 236–37. That Christ’s mission was to Israel, the bitter enemy of the Muslim world, cannot be denied; however, even this difference can be mollified by emphasizing the “universal aspects of his messiahship.” In particular, it is helpful to emphasize “Jesus’ warning that the Jews would be shut out of the Kingdom because of their unbelief while others from all parts of the world would enter” (p. 238).

¹⁰²Ibid., p. 237.

¹⁰³Ibid.

¹⁰⁴Ibid., p. 239.

¹⁰⁵Ibid.

¹⁰⁶Ibid., p. 240. Marantika ignores the fact that the Muslim concept of repentance is clearly works salvation; instead, he lists repentance as another “commonality” of the Muslim and Christian faiths that should receive “strong emphasis.”

¹⁰⁷Ibid., p. 237.

witness needs to say more about personal sins.”¹⁰⁸

A second point of conflict is Muslim views of Christ’s death and resurrection. Muslims either (1) deny the death of Christ or (2) deny his resurrection. Of course, neither is theologically acceptable. So what is the Christian apologist to do? The answer, to use the categories as outlined in this paper, is to shift from iconic correspondence (capitalizing on all the similarities in cultic elements of the two religions) to noetic correspondence (capitalizing on the similarities of thinking shared by all men). What one must do here is to exploit the inconsistencies of Islam: since positions (1) and (2) above cannot *both* be true, then Islam violates the law of non-contradiction by affirming both, and thus cannot be believed at this point.¹⁰⁹

Marantika cannot rightly be called a pluralist, but his methods betray what I contend is an unwarranted reliance on the neutrality of the mind, the neutrality of actions that extends even to neutral religious expressions, and formulaic procedures that have brute, independent value in making the gospel more likely to be accepted.

A PRESUPPOSITIONALIST PARADIGM FOR CONTEXTUALIZATION

In view of the foregoing, one might conclude that I see no legitimate interaction of the Christian and culture. Indeed, the reasoning in this paper resembles various anti- and counter-cultural religious expressions that dot the history of the church.

However, this conclusion does not account for many passages of Scripture that discuss the relationship of the church to “those without.” Surely Paul was interacting with culture when he “became all things to all men that he might win some” (1 Cor 9:22). He also mentioned evangelistic benefit while enjoining believers married to an unbelieving spouse to conduct themselves with propriety (1 Cor 7:14–16 cf. Titus 2:5). When Paul gave instructions concerning the church’s reputation to those who are without (1 Tim 2:2; 3:7; 5:14; 6:1; Titus 2:8, 10), his motivation was that the gospel would be “adorned,” so that “outsiders will [not] be disinclined to hear the gospel.”¹¹⁰ And while the interpretation of Paul’s sermon on Mars Hill recorded in Acts 17 is debated, all agree that there was some level of contextualization going on—he was appealing to pagan culture to make a

¹⁰⁸Ibid., p. 239.

¹⁰⁹Ibid.

¹¹⁰Gordon D. Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus*, New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1988), p. 83.

homiletical point.¹¹¹ To use Niebuhr's terminology, Christ was interacting with culture.

An Alternative Cultural Model: Christ Discrediting Culture

What, then, should the Christian's interaction with culture be? Were one to add a sixth category to Niebuhr's list, what would he call it, and what would it look like? I would contend that a good name for the relationship would be *Christ discrediting culture*. That is, the Christian should expose the "good" cultural expressions employed by the unregenerate as fraudulent and thus as illegitimate. This is not to say that we cannot recover and use some of the data and experiences used by culture that have been illegally stolen from the Christian worldview;¹¹² however, the fraudulent ideas and theories that pagan culture proposes as presuppositional to that data must be exposed and then discarded as totally irremediable.¹¹³

¹¹¹For interpretations of this passage in keeping with this paper, see Greg L. Bahnsen, "The Encounter of Jerusalem with Athens," in *Always Ready*, pp. 234–76; also Ned B. Stonehouse, *The Areopagus Address* (London: Tyndale, 1949); Cornelius Van Til, *Paul at Athens* (Phillipsburg, NJ: L. J. Grotenhuis, n.d.).

¹¹²Again I appeal to Bahnsen's concept of "borrowed capital." If culture has developed a political or judicial system, or has developed a style of dress, architecture, or music that borrows from God's character and reflects the image of God in man (the oft-cited "good, beautiful, and true"), then these are legitimate aspects of culture that may be embraced freely by the church. A Christian may participate in a just government or fight in a just war; he may employ beautiful secular music; he may build a building from plans designed by a careful yet unregenerate architect.

This article does not attempt to identify what a good government looks like or what beautiful music sounds like—these debates will be left for others to wage. However, the point to be stressed is that the church is not borrowing from the world in these cases; instead, the church is reclaiming what the world has borrowed from God. This factor, while subtle, can make a significant difference in practical decision-making. The church is not looking for something neutral (neither right nor wrong) that can be adapted or integrated with Christian themes; it is looking for something good, beautiful, and true that is particularly suited for Christian themes.

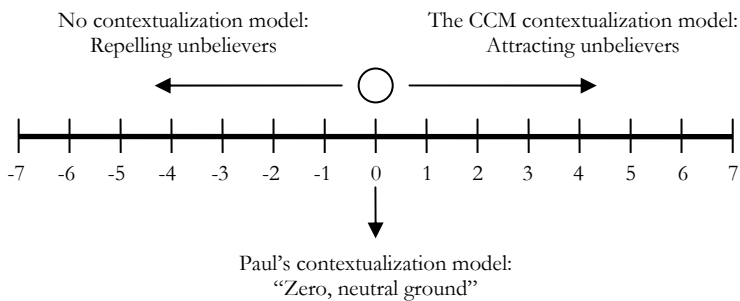
¹¹³This is the critical juncture between the understanding defended in this paper and the reconstructionist theology proposed by Bahnsen and other presuppositionalist theonomists. While this paper promotes the discrediting of pagan culture and the re-education of believers with distinctively Christian theological, philosophical, and instructional theories, it also insists that pagan culture is irremediable (following a consistent adherence to the doctrine of total depravity) and destined for eventual destruction in the eschaton. As such, once discredited, culture may be largely ignored even as we work to rescue people from its philosophical clutches. For the theonomist, on the other hand, the Christian goes beyond discrediting pagan culture, and presses forward to infiltrate and ultimately topple pagan culture, following such injunctions as 2 Corinthians 10:5: "We are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and we are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ." But note the context—it is the context of reindoctrinating *believers*

Two Sub-Models

Having proposed this basic model, we must recognize that there are two sub-models that subsist within the expression of this model, a passive expression and a more proactive expression. The point in this section is not to determine which of these is right or wrong, but to demonstrate that the “Christ discrediting culture” model proposed above has two distinct manifestations within conservative evangelicalism. I will leave the decision between these two sub-models as subjects for further research.

A Passive Sub-Model

John Makujina suggests that Scripture passages such as those discussed above allow contextualization only to the extent that the evangelist averts unnecessary barriers to the watching world.¹¹⁴ That is, based on these verses, contextualization should be a passive bid for non-offense rather than an active attempt to give the gospel an advantage. To use his words, contextualization should be “preventative and defensive” rather than “offensive.”¹¹⁵ Makujina draws a graph to illustrate his point, and I have adapted it below:



Makujina argues that the “CCM model”¹¹⁶ exceeds Paul’s intent

with correct theories and ideas, not of overthrowing culture. As a committed premillennialist and Calvinist, I personally reject this optimistic view of culture. And, while much of the work that theonomists have done in the realm of Christian education may be applauded, their political and economic designs should be rejected.

¹¹⁴*Measuring the Music* (Salem, OH: Schmull, 2000), pp. 18–23.

¹¹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 20.

¹¹⁶By “CCM Model,” Makujina refers to the practice of gaining a hearing for the gospel through the use of Contemporary Christian Music, much of which he rejects as

by being evangelistically offensive or proactive. Paul *did* contextualize, but only by removing barriers, not by building bridges. His goal was “zero, neutral ground from which he may preach Christ crucified.”¹¹⁷ Makujina speaks critically of bridge-building contextualizing efforts as illegitimately attempting to create a “persuasive advantage with his hearers when the gospel is presented,” something that Paul did not do.¹¹⁸

Makujina writes specifically on the topic of music, so his contextualization model is not a complete one as presented. However, using this window on his model we might expect it to allow for efforts such as updating of translations (removing the barrier of understanding), modernizing church facilities (removing the barriers of unsightliness, dim lighting, or safety issues), or the adoption of any number of socio-cultural customs of dress, meals, etc. (removing the barrier of potential insult), etc., but not proactive efforts such as carnivals, community bazaars, or Christian rock concerts, which strive for a “persuasive advantage” that conflicts with Paul’s injunctions in 1 Corinthians 1–2.¹¹⁹ Music selection and evangelistic methods may change in this model, but only under the governance of the regulative principle and with strict concern for active conformity to the character of God.

A Proactive Sub-Model

A second alternative allows for proactive contextualization under the broad umbrella of the “Christ discrediting culture” model. It allows the church to attract hearers by any means that is not *anti*-biblical. Such contextualization is not intended to give the evangelist a “persuasive advantage” (addressing Makujina’s concern). Instead, these active contextualization efforts (e.g., church-sponsored community or social events) serve only to attract an audience. They do not make an audience’s acceptance of the gospel message any more likely; they

“worldly.”

¹¹⁷Ibid., pp. 22–23. As this paper has suggested on numerous occasions, I do not like the term “neutral” used in this context. However, I do not believe that Makujina’s use of the term intends to convey that there is some neutral, common ground where the hearer is equally likely to accept or reject the gospel. He is speaking of ground where there are no barriers to the gospel save those that are *necessary* due to the clash of the inherent offense of the gospel with the depravity of man. Though I would choose a different term, Makujina is not positing religious neutrality.

¹¹⁸Ibid., pp. 22–23.

¹¹⁹I discussed the matter briefly with Makujina in a personal conversation, and he confirmed this understanding. Makujina does allow for the church to corporately exhibit social benevolence and give physical assistance to those outside the church; however, he sees these activities as part of an obedient response to biblical injunctions to be neighborly, not as a means to create a persuasive advantage for the gospel.

simply provide a platform for securing more people to hear the gospel.¹²⁰

Those who adopt this approach should not be accused of an “anything-goes” philosophy of contextualization. In addition to the principle that the effort cannot (1) employ any anti-biblical means,¹²¹ many will exclude means (2) that create continuing social commitments where physical, societal concerns begin to overshadow or even eliminate evangelistic intent¹²² or (3) that are so grand that people gravitate to the contextualization effort rather than the message the event is attempting to contextualize.¹²³ Nonetheless, this proactive model allows for a wide variety of means to gather an audience and create a spirit of goodwill that actively creates “open doors” to the presentation of the gospel (Col 4:3).

Summary

Though there are points of external similarity between Hesselgrave’s model and the presuppositionalist models proposed here, they are fundamentally different from a philosophical point of view. Specifically, the “Christ discrediting culture” recognizes pagan culture as thoroughly corrupt and philosophically irremediable. The Christian may never borrow from the pagan; he may only take back what the pagans have stolen from the Christian worldview. But more importantly, the Christian cannot expect pagans to *think* or *act* like Christians: though there is external resemblance between the regenerate and

¹²⁰An example might be John Frame’s book, *Contemporary Worship Music: A Biblical Defense* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1997), which defends church marketing while explicitly denying cultural neutrality (see esp. chaps. 5–6). Perhaps the best vindication of this approach in light of 1 Corinthians 1–2, however, appears in Duane Litfin’s dissertation on Paul’s theology of proclamation in 1 Corinthians 1–4. He concludes: “Techniques designed to enhance the attention or comprehension of the listener may have been quite acceptable to the Apostle.... Indeed, Paul explicitly claims to have adapted his approach to his various audiences in just this sense (1 Cor. 3.1–2; 9.19–23), i.e., in order to win a hearing and accommodate the comprehension of his listeners. It need only have been those rhetorical strategies which Paul perceived as designed to promote *yielding* that would have appeared inappropriate to him, for it was only in this realm that one began to tread beyond the role of the herald and impinge upon the work of the Spirit in inducing πιστις” (*St. Paul’s Theology of Proclamation: 1 Corinthians 1–4 and Greco-Roman Rhetoric*, Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series 79 [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994], 261–62).

¹²¹E.g., activities that might encourage profligacy, or that use deceptive oratorical tricks to create an artificially captive audience, etc.

¹²²E.g., some eschew church-based soup kitchens, hospitals, orphanages, etc.

¹²³E.g., concerts, carnivals, or other venues where evangelism is sidelined by sheer entertainment.

the unregenerate, there is a quantitative *and qualitative* difference between the two—one that no amount of contextualization can overcome.

FINAL SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The relationship of Christ to culture is a weighty topic that elicits a diversity of opinion even within the confines of evangelicalism. However, as this article has sought to demonstrate, there are foundational discussions of ontology, epistemology, noetic sin, and cultural neutrality that tend to be lost in the face of the more exciting and practical discussions of how the Bible may be integrated with socio-cultural and ethnic features of society.

This paper does not purport to deal with all the foundational discussions thoroughly; it leaves much to be developed—the integration of reflections on common grace, depravity, and the *imago dei*, to name a few. Nor is the alternative model it proposes, “Christ discrediting Culture,” thoroughly developed. It leaves, in fact, two major sub-models vying with each other for ascendancy.

The paper has instead striven to demonstrate that there is no religious neutrality in culture, and as a result, no noetic correspondence, no iconic correspondence, and no formulae that guarantee or even augment the efficacy of the gospel message. This in no way implies that contextualization should not be attempted. This author strongly recommends society-specific methods that remove barriers of unnecessary hostility to the evangelist and his message. At the same time, however, we must impose limits on the contextualization process based on the proposal that culture is intrinsically evil, and rises to do “righteousness” only when it borrows illicitly from the Christian worldview for its own selfish advantage. Only when this foundation is laid can the scope, extent, and effectiveness of contextualization be biblically gauged.