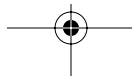
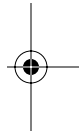
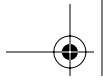




Part One

TOWARD A HERMENEUTIC OF CULTURAL ANALYSIS







1

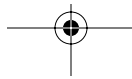
THE CHRISTIAN & CULTURE



Most of us are oblivious to the culture around us. Like the air that we breathe, it is invisible and we simply take it for granted. It has been said that human culture is much like the relationship between a fish and water. One could ask the question of a fish, “Is your nose wet?” You and I, of course, know that the fish’s nose is wet. Yet, we do not know what a fish actually thinks about the water around itself.¹ If fish were scientists, probably the last thing they would discover is water! So it is with us. We live and move about in the culture with which we are closely and invisibly enmeshed.

What awakens us to culture is contrast. In our global village, the media readily project images of different cultures around the world—from the tribal groups living in the African rain forests to the elite business community who reside in New York’s gleaming towers. The contrast becomes even more vivid through travel. Travel allows someone to see, taste and touch different cultures. Yet, the people who are most aware of culture are those who have lived in different parts of the world. This level of contrast leaves a more lasting impression. Those who have *lived* in different settings begin to actually feel the impact of alternative cultures.

¹Alvin J. Schmidt, *Veiled and Silenced* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1989), p. 1.





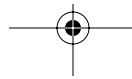
During my own life, the years spent in Alberta on an Indian reserve, in cosmopolitan Toronto, in the politically charged city of Ottawa, in a remote village of the Northwest Territories, in Baltimore during the racial riots, in the deep south of Texas, etc., have all left their mark. My own awakening to culture has come about quite by accident—through living in these dramatically different cultures.

However, one does not have to leave home to discover culture. There is another way to see culture right where one lives. Mind you, contrast is still the key. But this time we look for differences within one particular location—differences that often occur over time. This awakening to culture comes from viewing changes in our society so that we see an “old” culture and a “new” culture side by side. We can discover culture simply by looking at the changing attitudes, laws, rituals and behavior around us. For example, the electronic highway of the Internet is radically changing the way that people relate to other people within our country and around the world. The youth of today will form quite a different impression of political, intellectual and community boundaries than those of former days. Along similar lines, think about what the last generation was taught in school about the environment. Compare that to what this new generation is learning. The contrast is overwhelming. The changing values and attitudes of our culture provide yet another way to access what is otherwise invisible, or so heavily camouflaged that we never really see it.

The Christian Challenge

As the winds of culture blow, Christians are often faced with incredible challenges. We inevitably encounter difficult choices. Should we endorse the changes in our culture or should we challenge our culture? The question of cultural/trans-cultural assessment is essentially a very practical one: as I stick my finger into the air and feel the winds of culture blowing, how should I respond? Should I act *counterculturally* or *paraculturally* in my life? Should I go *against* my culture or move *with* my culture? That is the crucial question with which we all wrestle.

So how does a Christian respond to cultural change? Our initial answer is quite simple: *It is necessary for Christians to challenge their culture where it departs from kingdom values; it is equally necessary for them to identify with their culture on all other matters.* This axiom reflects the thinking of the apostle Paul, who often acted very pragmatically when it came to cultural issues. For example, Paul’s response to the Corinthians eating meat offered to idols is insightful. The apostle challenges his culture by not eating at public ceremonies held in pagan temples, where such an action would violate the participant’s covenant with God (1 Cor 8:10) and potentially destroy the faith of others (1 Cor 10:14-22). However, he sides with his culture whenever he is eating at a non-Christian’s house,



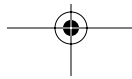
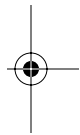


outside of a cultic context. In that setting Paul would eat meat offered to idols, whether it had been sacrificed by the host or simply purchased at the market as a post-temple special (1 Cor 10:27). The apostle's *Magna Carta* of cultural sensitivity might be found in his words, "I have become *all* things to *all* people, that I might by *all* means save some" (1 Cor 9:22 NRSV, emphasis added). Paul viewed culture as a mixed bag. If something is worth making an issue out of, then challenge culture on the issue. Yet, if something is not terribly important and does not violate one's faith, then utilize it for the sake of the gospel!

Most of the time it is easy to determine where our culture departs from kingdom values. On negative issues such as pornography, abortion, murder, theft and rape, the Christian community generally has very little doubt about its response. We want to challenge any ambivalence within society on these matters and initiate counteraction. Likewise, on positive issues such as care for the elderly, environmental concerns, compassionate health care, community spirit in helping the poor, political freedom, and fair and equitable justice, our response should be clear. We want to applaud our community, speak an encouraging word and lend a hand.

However, sometimes the hardest part is trying to determine what our kingdom values are. Fortunately, these cases are the exception, not the norm. On certain occasions the biblical text is not entirely clear. In part, the lack of clarity may be due to the fact that Scripture itself adopts what we might call "kingdom values" (those which transcend any culture and time) as well as "cultural values" (those which are locked into a particular place and time). Within the text of Scripture we find portions that are transcultural (e.g., love for one's neighbor) and portions that are cultural, or more accurately, portions that contain significant cultural components (e.g., slavery texts). For the original readers these two entities—cultural and transcultural—were not necessarily antithetical. In all likelihood, the distinction between the two would have gone unnoticed for the original readers. Only in the context of a different culture would the distinction be readily seen, due to the principle of contrast mentioned above.

As part of our interpretive task, then, we must distinguish between kingdom values and cultural values within the biblical text. With every change in our culture we have to reevaluate our interpretation of Scripture to determine what our perspective should be. At first glance, one might think that this would be an easy task. But it is not. When we arrive at the doorstep of Scripture, we encounter a text which *itself* was written within a particular cultural grid. It was not written in a vacuum, nor created for some theoretical and utopian society. Not only were the authors influenced by their own cultures, but the text itself was transmitted through various cultural forms, known as genres. Also, the people who first received the text read it within their assumed cultural grid.





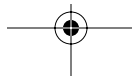
If we are to speak to our world today, we must first evaluate the role of culture in the biblical text. It would be a travesty to proclaim to our world a theological position without exploring its cultural/transcultural status. In this venture, we want a balanced approach. We do not want to make something that is transcultural into something that is culturally bound. On the other hand, we do not want to make that which is a cultural non-absolute into an absolute for every culture.

Definition: What Is a “Cultural-Component” Text?

Before moving along too far, we must start by defining our terms. In one sense all of Scripture is cultural. Inasmuch as the biblical text reflects various cultural forms in its making (genres) and addresses different sociological structures in its message (for example, marriage, society, religion, work, politics) it is inextricably bound to culture. In this respect, even the transcultural elements in Scripture have a cultural component. However, this is *not* what is usually meant in biblical studies by the term *cultural* (or *cultural-component*) when it is used in contrast to *transcultural*. This contrastive usage of the term cultural is much more limited in its meaning and is generally a shortened form for various equivalent expressions such as *cultural confinement* or *cultural relativity* or *culturally bound*. When we talk about a text that has a “cultural component” within it, this designation highlights the issue of application between cultures. For our purposes the expression *cultural component* and its various equivalents may be defined as “those aspects of the biblical text that ‘we leave behind’ as opposed to ‘take with us’ due to cultural differences between the text’s world and the interpreters’ world as we apply the text to subsequent generations.” In a sense, cultural confinement/relativity is the gap between the world of the text and that of the interpreter, which requires a reapplication of the text.

More helpful than a definition might be a sketch of what is meant by *cultural* and *transcultural* through a series of graphic contrasts. For the Christian who is interested in applying the text today, we must search out and discover what components of a text are cultural as opposed to ones that are transcultural:

cultural component		transcultural component
cultural values	vs.	kingdom values
culturally confined	vs.	beyond cultural limits
time-bound truth	vs.	timeless truth
culturally relative application	vs.	transcultural principle
temporal	vs.	supratemporal
nontransferable form	vs.	transferable function
local	vs.	universal





momentary husk	vs.	enduring kernel
peripheral meaning	vs.	core meaning
wineskins	vs.	wine

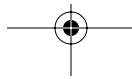
If a reader does not like one or more of these distinctions, that is fine. Just delete them from the list. I have provided a sufficient sampling of alternative ways of expressing much the same distinction in order that readers will find at least one or two comparative couplets with which they will feel comfortable. I will generally use the expressions *transcultural* to describe components of a text on one end of the continuum and *cultural* for those components on the other end. When I use the word *cultural* in this applicational or hermeneutical sense, it functions as a short-form for various other equivalent expressions: *culturally confined*, *culturally relative*, *culturally bound* and *culturally locked*. But I do not wish to quibble over terminology, so one should find and use whatever words one thinks are suitable. These are simply the various ways that Christian authors describe the phenomenon when applying the text across different worlds.

It is beyond my objective to pursue the finer nuances and philosophical differences in the definition and theology of cultural/transcultural assessment. While such discussion is interesting to the field of hermeneutics, it makes little persuasive difference in the final outcome of evaluating actual cases, such as the ones we will look at. My own objective is much more practical. I will focus primarily on the criteria by which Christians can determine what is cultural and what is transcultural within Scripture.

Contemporary Issues Facing the Church: Women and Homosexuals

The winds of culture are blowing today on two significant issues: the women's issue and the homosexual issue. Social change is taking place in both of these areas. As a result, Christians have to reevaluate their beliefs due to changing attitudes toward women and toward homosexuals. In North America the changes related to women have been developing for more than a century. The changing attitudes and legislation toward homosexuals is comparatively recent (within the last quarter century or so). The impact of these cultural changes upon the Christian community has been felt in somewhat of a delayed response.

Before introducing a hermeneutical model and exploring the various criteria for assessing the cultural and transcultural components of a text, it might be helpful to walk through a broad introduction to these two pertinent issues. I will sketch the range of options and label them. For those readers who have an extensive background and exposure to these issues, this overview will simply intro-





duce the labels and category names I will use in the pages to follow. Such readers may simply want to skim what follows or move ahead to the next chapter. However, for those who are just beginning to wade into these matters, it is important to establish the larger picture of interpretive options before entering into the next chapters. The descriptions below will provide some working handles and set boundaries for interacting with the central issues.

The women’s issue

With the women’s issue, there are roughly four positions that cross the spectrum of thought today. While these categories have some fluidity and other intermediate positions could be introduced, the four positions below will provide a sufficient framework for our discussions. Each view will be briefly described, then more fully developed in the major three spheres in which men and women relate: home, church and society.

Hard/strong patriarchy (hierarchy)

Overview: Unilateral submission of women with an extensive power differential.

Home: Women focus most of their energies in the home; they are to “submit to” and “obey” their husbands in all things; the husband’s word is the final authority.

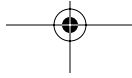
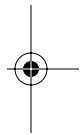
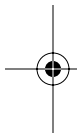
Church: A woman should not function in any capacity that places her in a position of greater power than a man; women are not permitted to teach in any setting where men are present. Depending upon the ecclesiastical structure, women may or may not be permitted to vote on selecting male leaders and on congregational issues; women should not be ordained to ministry in any capacity.

Society: If a woman works outside of the home, she should not hold positions of authority in any sphere of society (e.g., politics, education, business); men, not women, should provide for the home financially. Women should not be in leadership roles where they can exercise authority over a man; however, women are generally permitted to vote.

Soft patriarchy (hierarchy)

Overview: Unilateral submission of women with a moderate power differential.

Home: Women are free to work outside of the home; within the marriage they function in a cooperative manner with their husbands; uli-





mately the husband has the *theoretical* right to exercise authority in decision making over his wife, yet this should only be used on rare occasions, if at all. Words with a strong power-differential connotation, such as *obey* and *submission*, are still used but they often fade into the background.

Church: Women may teach men in any setting other than from the pulpit, as the senior pastor would on a weekly basis; they can work on a pastoral staff in a paid position; they can be deacons, but generally they are not permitted to function in an official capacity as elders. Often women function in an extended leadership role through participation on boards or councils with names other than the biblical categories; they are encouraged to vote on leadership selection and on church issues. Women may be ordained to serve in ministry roles other than the senior/preaching pastor.

Society: Women may function in an unrestricted way in society; they may hold positions of power over men; they may teach men; they may pursue any leadership position and are encouraged to vote in political elections.

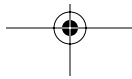
Evangelical egalitarianism

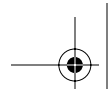
Overview: Mutual submission with equality of power between male and female. Some argue for no role distinctions; others hold to minimal role distinctions based on biological differences.

Home: Women are free to work outside of the home; husbands and wives relate to each other in a model of mutual (not unilateral) submission; decisions are made based upon mutual consent and consensus. Wives generally play a greater role in nurturing infants and young children, otherwise roles are determined by mutual agreement through an evaluation of individual strengths.

Church: Women function within the church based upon character qualifications, gifts and theological education, not on the basis of gender restrictions; a woman may function as an elder or in pulpit ministry. Women can be ordained to any sphere of church ministry; in a large church the ideal would be to have a shared pulpit ministry utilizing qualified men and women.

Society: Women may function in an unrestricted way in society: they may hold positions of power over men; they may teach men; they may pursue any leadership position and are encouraged to vote in political elections.





Secular egalitarianism

Overview: Equal rights and no gender-defined roles.

Home: Women are often encouraged to work outside the home as a greater priority than the family and as a necessity for personal fulfillment. The husband-wife relationship is based upon the equal rights of the individual, rather than mutual deference; the relationship frequently evidences an extreme in personal autonomy, rather than interdependence.

Church: Secular egalitarianism generally does not have much of a place for religion.

Society: Women may function in an unrestricted way in society: they may hold positions of power over men; they may teach men; they may pursue any leadership position and are encouraged to vote in political elections.

The homosexual issue

As with the women's issue, our culture and some parts of the Christian subculture are changing in their perspective toward gays and lesbians. There are several positions that represent the spectrum of thinking on the homosexual issue; each view is briefly developed here.

Marital heterosexuality only

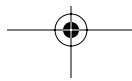
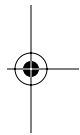
Homosexuality is not an acceptable lifestyle for Christians, whether between consenting adults on a casual basis or within monogamous, equal-partner relationships. The only acceptable means of heterosexual expression is within a covenant relationship of marriage between two adults.

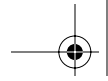
Covenant and equal-partner homosexuality

Homosexuality is an acceptable lifestyle for Christians provided the partners are equal-status, consenting adults and the relationship is one of a monogamous, covenant and lasting kind. The assumption is that the Bible's condemnation of homosexuality is due to the lack of these elements in the ancient world.

Casual adult homosexuality

Homosexuality is an appropriate lifestyle for any member of society provided it involves consenting adults. Participation in same-sex eroticism may be in any form, not simply within covenant relationships or between equal-status partners.





As with the women's issue, we could develop some of the finer variations within each of these views.² However, further nuances will become evident below.

At this stage, these three options for homosexuality and four options for women are the primary categories being discussed in theological circles today.

The Ultimate Culture Question

A growing number of Christian voices have begun to argue for removing hierarchy in gender relationships and for doing away with any stigma attached to covenant homosexual relationships. This move away from a straightforward reading of the biblical text clearly reflects the broader move in our society toward a less restrictive viewpoint on these two areas. Our quest, then, is to determine whether the church should move *with* our culture or *against* our culture on these two issues. We need to ask the question, Which components within Scripture are cultural and which are transcultural? Our investigation will focus directly on this question in parts one and two. Before we get there, however, we need to establish a big-picture framework for our thinking. In the next chapter, then, I will address the question of what kind of hermeneutic will best enable us to travel down this road of cultural/transcultural assessment.



²For a more detailed survey of various perspectives, see Larry R. Holben, *What Christians Think about Homosexuality: Six Representative Viewpoints* (Richland Hills, Tex.: D & F Scott, 1999).

