



Missional Journal

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"Through a Glass Darkly"

With these words St. Paul (1 Cor. 13:12) contrasts the limitations of our present spiritual vision and understanding with the fullness of knowledge that will be ours at the return of the Lord. This metaphor may be helpful as we consider the last of Biblical Seminary's theological convictions.

The Necessity of Cultural Engagement

We are committed to ongoing engagement with culture and the world for the sake of our witness to the gospel, and to continual learning from Christians in other cultural settings.[1]

There are three points I want to make about this statement: 1) culture as the context for mission, 2) culture as a way of seeing, and 3) the need for cross-cultural learning.

1. Culture as context

By "culture" we refer to the traditional ways of thinking, speaking, and acting that characterize a particular group of people. In our highly mobile Western world, we must think of culture not as a single entity but as a complex interplay of contrasting and even competing ways by which different groups construe their world.

This diversity of cultures is one reason the church in North America must now think of itself as a missionary church. We are surrounded by groups of people who do not share our way of viewing the world. To bring the gospel to our world we will need to engage in the missionary task of translation. We must communicate the truth about Jesus in ways that are faithful to Scripture and effective in crossing cultural boundaries.

If you are interested in supporting our vision

Tim Keller, pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Manhattan, understands this challenge better than most. "When

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Paul spoke to Greeks, he confronted their culture's idol of speculation and philosophy with the 'foolishness' of the cross, and then presented Christ's salvation as true wisdom. When he spoke to Jews, he confronted their culture's idol of power and accomplishment with the 'weakness' of the cross, and then presented the gospel as true power (1 Cor. 1:22-25)."[2] In affirming one gospel, Keller nonetheless argues that different "forms" of the gospel are appropriate to people of differing cultural backgrounds.

So, in the context of his own ministry in New York City, Keller recognizes that people with religious backgrounds understand the concept of sin as an offense against the law of God. These people can therefore be reached with the more traditional evangelical summary of the gospel which presents the cross as divine provision for human sin and guilt.

But Keller notes, "...Manhattan is also filled with postmodern listeners who consider all moral statements to be culturally relative and socially constructed. If you try to convict them of guilt for sexual lust, they will simply say, 'You have your standards, and I have mine.' If you respond with a diatribe on the dangers of relativism, your listeners will simply feel scolded and distanced." [3] For this audience Keller finds it more effective to speak of sin not as guilt but as idolatry.

My point is not to argue the rightness or wrongness of Pastor Keller's specific approach to preaching, although I agree with much of his article. The point is rather to emphasize the missional challenge we face. Careful interpretation of Scripture must now be combined with careful interpretation of culture(s) if we are to witness faithfully to our generation.

2. Culture as a way of seeing

Paul talks about seeing in the mirror "dimly" or "obscurely." This is due both to our finiteness and our fallenness, and both play out in the influence of culture upon us and upon those to whom we bring the gospel. Culture allows us to see certain things while it makes other realities opaque.

Here's another way of saying this: None of us perceive reality (including the Bible) in a purely objective way. We are all imbedded in our culture. We observe from a limited perspective. No one enjoys a God's-eye view of the world except God himself.

When I was a beginning student in theology, most evangelicals were objectivists. We saw ourselves as people who could simply observe the world and the Bible without being impacted by our cultural surroundings. Perspective (bias) was not a problem, at least not for us! Abstract scientific induction was our model for the study of the Bible and the articulation of theology: begin with the pure data and by careful, logical process craft your sermon or build your theology.

But now postmodernism has powerfully critiqued that type of naïve modernism. There is a growing convergence among evangelical scholars that objectivism is not workable. No less a conservative than D.A. Carson now says that "... human beings may know objective truth *in the sense that they may know what actually conforms to reality*, but they cannot know it objectively, that is, they cannot escape their finitude and (this side of the consummation) their fallenness..."[4] Similarly, John Franke writes, "We simply cannot escape from our particular setting and gain access to an objective, transcultural vantage point."[5] The result, says Carson, is that **we are all perspectivalists**.

This has both positive and negative consequences. On the one hand, culture may function in a positive way to help us see particular dimensions of our humanity or of the world that may otherwise escape us. Our conviction statement reads: "It is also true that God can work in a culture to surface issues of justice, equity, or mercy that the church has neglected." Clearly the civil rights movement of the second half of the 20th century surfaced a glaring inconsistency in the theology and practice of many white Christians in North America.

On the other hand, culture can impact the church negatively as well. In this case it blinds us to truths that may be obvious to those of a different cultural background. For example, the narcissistic individualism[6] of the West has left American Christians with an anemic understanding of the church. As a result many of us would summarize the gospel with no reference to the centrality of the church in God's purposes, and many of us live as if salvation were merely a private affair between Jesus and me.

3. Cross-cultural learning

So, any particular culture both illuminates and obscures aspects of reality. To quote Carson again, "...every expression of

human culture simultaneously discloses that we were made in God's image and shows itself to be mis-shaped and corroded by human rebellion against God." [7]

How then are we to live out Christian faith without being co-opted unknowingly by the most dangerous elements of our surroundings? The primary answer is that we must be willing to bring our most fundamental assumptions back to Scripture in the recognition that a fresh hearing of the Word may yet disclose points of correction or expansion in our living of the gospel.

However, our convictions statement speaks of the need for "continual learning from Christians in other cultural settings." The way we understand and live out the gospel needs to be compared with the ways brothers and sisters in *other places* hear the same message. In the process we will find elements of similarity and difference; the commonalities will confirm our faith and the plurality of views will humble and perhaps instruct us.

The growing weakness of the church in the West and the explosion of the church in the two-thirds world should make us teachable. Wheaton College professor Kevin Vanhoozer says, "Those who cannot see their own cultural conditioning are doomed to repeat it. It is just here that Western systematic theologians have much to learn.... It is ultimately for the sake of better biblical interpretation that Western theologians need to attend to how the Bible is being read and practiced in the non-Western world." [8]

In summary, none of us can escape culture. It is the context in which we understand, embody, and communicate the gospel.

The church's missional challenge in every particular cultural setting is to incarnate the message faithfully.

At Biblical Seminary we believe the best hope for carrying out that mission is a fresh listening for the voice of the Spirit as we read Scripture together with the global church.



[1]The full text of our Convictions is found here:
<http://www.biblical.edu/images/discover/Convictions0808.pdf>

- [2] Tim Keller, "The Gospel in All Its Forms," at <http://www.christianitytoday.com/le/2008/spring/9.74.html?start=1>
- [3] <http://www.christianitytoday.com/le/2008/spring/9.74.html?start=5>
- [4] D.A. Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited* (Eerdmans, 2008), p. 101.
- [5] John Franke, *The Character of Theology* (Baker, 2005), p. 90.
- [6] See my earlier *Missional Journal* on Narcissism:
<http://www.biblical.edu/images/belong/PDFs/Vol11No11.pdf>
- [7] Idem, p. 49
- [8] Kevin Vanhoozer, "One Rule to Rule Them All?" in *Globalizing Theology* edited by Craig Ott and Harold Netland (Baker, 2006), pp. 116-17.

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