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Story, Song, Concept: Mission and the Three Dimensions of Culture

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Three missionaries worked together as a team in a remote country where there had been little Gospel witness. One missionary mainly told stories about Jesus and the Good News of God's reign. One wrote and sang songs that communicated well in the host culture. The third missionary worked hard to understand the indigenous worldview and its worldstory. He became skillful in articulating Christian theology in categories that reached deeply into the philosophical underpinnings of the people he was working with.

This was an effective team. Each member's work helped enrich that of the other two. The three did better together than any one of them could have done by themselves. These three missionaries might have been men or they might have been women. In this story, they could have been either or both.

And the ministry flourished! Many men and women and children from across the host culture came to know Jesus Christ and their Savior and Lord, becoming faithful disciples who walked in the ways of Jesus—as the Gospel teaches. Churches were born and multiplied, and a wide diversity of spiritual gifts were awakened within the new churches, broadening Gospel witness into many sectors of the culture.

This mission initiative redemptively combined these three dynamics: Story, song, and concept. It was like a threefold cord not quickly broken. Combining multiple dimensions of culture, this mission proved more redemptively transformative than any one of these would have been by itself.

This article is an invitation to consider how mission can be effective by recognizing and combining or "synergizing" the various aspects and dynamics of culture.

From beginning to end, from Creation to New Creation and beyond, the Christian story is the story of culture. This means that Christian mission, beginning to end, is the story of cultural engagement, cultural dynamics, cultural conflict, and cultural transformation.

Culture is an inevitable result of creation itself. It is a fruit of God's covenant relationship with his creation, with both people and the Earth. It is helpful therefore to examine culture and the cultural implications and dimensions of the Gospel. The Gospel's impact on culture and culture's impact on the Gospel are pressing issues of Christian discipleship and witness.

Two bad things happen if we ignore culture: We become blind to dimensions of our present culturally-

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embedded life that have important discipleship implications, and we live with a scaled-down picture of the life to come (as we will see). We run the risk of unrecognized idolatry in our present life as well as a flat, sterile view of eternal life.

Biblical teachings however are *transcultural*.[1] They apply everywhere. But the ways they are understood and expressed in culture can vary greatly. Sin and evil can look different in different cultural settings. Sin infects and affects not only persons, but every fiber of a culture or social group. Salvation also touches every dimension of culture, creating a *new social and cultural reality* as well as a new spiritual one. Salvation touches every dimension of human existence. Churches take on varied cultural forms depending on context. Church structures themselves are cultural objects and must be culturally understood and evaluated.

WHAT IS CULTURE?

Culture is the word we use to signify the results of humans' interaction with each other and with the environment over time. Culture involves such things as what we eat, the materials we use for shelter and clothing, how we communicate, and myriad other dynamics such as music, art, group organization, stories, and religion.

Definition

Given this realization, I define culture in a more comprehensive way than is often done. Culture means all the ways human beings interact with each other, with their physical environment, and with the unseen environment.

Culture is first of all physical objects and ecologies, because on these all human life rests. Every cultural artifact comes first from the Earth. It is made first of physical things—objects and living creatures found in and shaped from the particular environments where people live. Wood, rocks, shells, paint, glass; ants, worms, eagles, lions; things both living and inanimate—all these are "stuff" and building blocks of culture. These objects and artifacts then emerge symbolically as art. Think of the hundreds of amazing cave paintings at Lascaux and Chauvet-Pont-d'Arc in southwestern France, some dating back more than 30,000 years—remarkable images of deer, horses, lions, and other creatures, many in color and depicting animals in motion. Other cultures may have their own ancient objects of art and music.

As we humans interact with physical things, we make culture. We make choices in how we use and shape things. We create cultural objects and ideas, developing tools, thoughts, symbols, music, and many other cultural artifacts. Earthly culture is physical-thing-dependent. Human culture varies with weather, terrain, and available food, water, and building materials.

We easily forget how *physical* culture is. Say "culture" and we think of art and literature and orchestras, or maybe science and philosophies and customs—not dirt. Yet culture mostly rises from the soil.

Is there anything more cultural than food, grown in the ground? —the whole vast world of agriculture. Much that we call culture begins with agriculture.[2] Agriculture is of course prominent in the Old Testament, and thus also in the New, as in Jesus' parables. The "good land" God gave Israel, "a land with flowing streams," was "a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey" (Deut 8:7-8). When Israel flourished in faithfulness to God's covenant, it was well supplied with "meal, cakes of figs, clusters of raisins, wine, oil, oxen, and sheep," and many other fruits of the land (1 Chron 12:40).

So culture is agriculture. And equally, culture is music. Music and singing too are deeply rooted dimensions of culture. Musical instruments are made from physical things. Even music itself connects with the sounds of creation, as Bernie Krause shows in *The Great Animal Orchestra: Finding the Origins of Music in the World's Wild Places.*

In this sense culture reflects the intimate creation-connection between God, people, and the Earth. God's Earth covenant, revealed in Genesis 9, underlies culture.

Physical things like hills and fruits and rocks and animals become the raw material of language, which builds up analogies and metaphors and ideas, which shape thought and stories, which grow into literature, music, dance, spirituality and more, and thus over time arise as culture. Take away material things and the "natural" world (that is, creation), and culture collapses.

Culture grows like a tree; sings like a bird; rolls like thunder; uses tools like hoes and violins, all made from the stuff nature provides. From the Earth.

This physical, material side of culture is so omnipresent that, like air, we often don't see it. The physical becomes invisible. Yet it never *really* disappears. Physical culture always is present. Physical things are ever-present in fact, in the Gospel, and in church and mission, just as they are from the first to the last page of Scripture—from "Let there be light" (Gen 1:3) to "tree of life" (Rev 22:19).

Good theology and discipleship remind us of this. The Bible reveals God's concern for physical things. Reading Scripture however, we get so used to sheep, fig trees, sandals, fish, grass, vines, and so forth that we stop *seeing* them. Looking for invisible spiritual things, we miss the visible. This is a form

1. See William J. Webb, *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), Chapter 3, "Cultural/Transcultural Analysis: A Road Map," 67-70, and note the references to Webb's analysis in Chapter 3 of this present book.

2. See for example Wendell Berry's many works, particularly *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture* (New York: Avon Books, 1978); The Gift of Good Land (New York: North Point Press, 1981); *Bringing It to the Table: On Farming and Food* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2009).

of unbiblical dualism. We may mistakenly think that Jesus' parables teach only *spiritual* lessons; have only heavenly meanings.

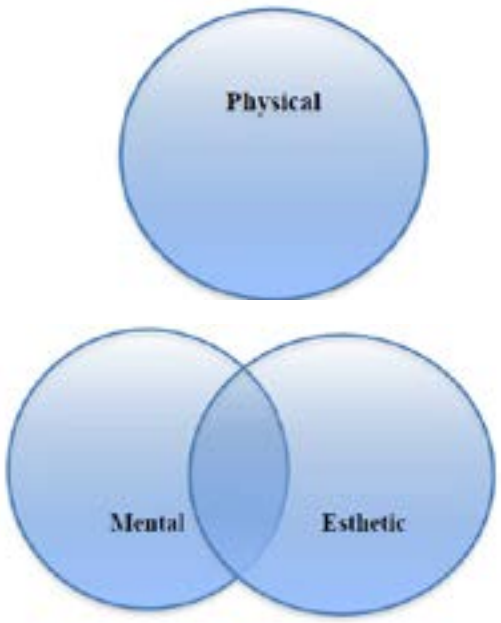
Christian life and mission always happen within one or many cultures. Faithful discipleship works with and within culture, not against it. Following Jesus means cooperating with the Spirit's work of bringing all things into harmony with Jesus Christ. Faithful Christian mission neither ignores culture nor dominates or poisons it. Living as salt and light and leaven in the world, Jesus followers appreciate and enjoy all things good in culture, seeking meanwhile to redeem and enrich it. So "whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things" (Phil 4:8).

Three Dimensions of Culture

All the threads of culture intertwine—physical, social, spiritual, intellectual, esthetic, economic, scientific, whatever. For ease in analysis, let's view them in three parallel groups—*material/physical, mental/intellectual, and esthetic/imaginative*—with typical examples:

Material/Physical	Mental/Intellectual	Esthetic/Imaginative
Food	Language	Music
Tools	Literature	Art
Clothing	Science	Drama
Houses	Philosophy	Poetry
Plants/animals	Ideas/concepts	Images/intuitions
Physical gifts/skills	Mental gifts/skills	Esthetic gifts/skills
(e.g., carpentry)	(e.g., speaking)	(e.g., singing)

These of course overlap, interact, interpenetrate, so may be pictured as circles or spheres:



The interaction is of course much more intimate than pictured here; in fact—culturally and neurologically—there is no way to isolate one from the others. Think of the complexity of the human brain.

One way or another, all these dimensions are necessary for human life. So all become artifacts of culture. We may not think of plants and animals, or the physical Earth itself, as part of culture. But they are, for they shape human behavior in physical, intellectual, and esthetic ways (food, ideas, beauty). So we speak of agri-culture.

This three-part distinction—physical, mental, esthetic—is illuminating, though somewhat artificial. Culture is a kind of ecosystem. All things intertwine and overlap. Carpentry requires mental and esthetic skills as well as physical ones. Singing has physical and mental dimensions (mind and vocal cords). Tools can be mental and imaginative as well as physical. Yet the distinctions are useful. They point out the breadth of culture; the importance and engagement of all these dimensions.

We can watch all these in Jesus' life. The Son of Man ate and digested food, wore clothing, rode in boats, and practiced carpentry (material culture). He spoke, read, taught, and could write (mental culture). He sang, recited poetry, and told stories (esthetic culture). He enjoyed all these dimensions when uncorrupted, and grieved when he found them corrupted. "Look at the lilies of the field, how they grow!" (Mt 6:28 paraphrased). A wholesome understanding of Jesus, the Gospel, and Christian witness requires attention to all dimensions of culture. This the Bible shows us.

1. Material/Physical Culture

Material/physical culture plays a big role in Scripture. The early chapters of Genesis tell of the variety and abundance of the physical universe, including sun, moon and stars, and all living creatures. Later chapters speak of rivers, mountains, deserts, fruit, gold, bronze, iron, cities, cypress wood, mandrakes, stones, bricks, swords, salt, bitumen, money, silver cups, altars—and this is just a start.

Trees especially play a key role. Matthew Sleeth astutely notes, "Every important character and every major event [in the Bible] has a tree marking the spot. There is a tree in the first and last chapter of the Bible, in the first psalm, and in the first gospel." And similarly in dozens of other places throughout the biblical books.[3] Trees are first of all physical, then quickly become symbols and metaphors.

The central symbol of Jesus' atonement—the cross, made from a tree—is a material cultural artifact with its own history in human culture. Though it is much more, its very physicalness is a key part of its meaning.

God's plan is that his whole living creation "be fruitful and multiply" (Gen 1:22, 1:28), and that the desert "blossom as the rose" (Isa 35:1). God intends the flourishing of his whole creation. This is consistent with the way each part was designed—its inbuilt

3. Matthew Sleeth, *Reforesting Faith: What Trees Teach Us About the Nature of God and His Love for Us* (New York: Waterbrook / Random House, 2019), 5.

capacities and purposes; the genetic and esthetic potential of every atom and cell. The interactive, ecological relationship of every bit of creation, human and nonhuman, with every other part—this is the divine design.

God wants children, women, and men to fulfill their own unique roles. You and I gain from the beauty and abundance of the material world. We are commissioned to contribute to its thriving, using the Earth creatively for good and beneficent purposes and the glory of God.

2. Intellectual/Mental Culture

Humans create, enjoy, and benefit from the intellectual and mental "things" of culture—ideas, literature, science, and much else. Here also women and men reflect God's image.

To most people, *culture* means mainly the intellectual and esthetic artifacts we have developed and continue to create. The Scriptures do of course speak of intellectual/mental culture. The Bible itself, as inspired divine revelation, is an intellectual artifact consisting of words, ideas, and various kinds of literature. It is also a physical object, consisting of word-images on stone (the Ten Commandments), papyrus, parchment (from animal skins), cloth, wood, glass, printed paper, and today various electronic and digital forms.

Human intellectual culture includes thousands of languages. Several of these are mentioned in the Bible, itself first composed in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek.

The Bible refers to the intellectual culture of other peoples, not just the Hebrews. We read of the language and learning of the Egyptians (Moses), the Babylonians (Dan 1:4, 17), and the Greeks and Romans (Paul). Jesus apparently spoke and read Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic. He was familiar with the various kinds of literature of the Hebrew people. He was fully immersed in and a part of the intellectual/mental culture of his day. Not being so would have hampered his mission.

God's plan is that all the aspects of intellectual and mental culture be used for human good, the care and flourishing of creation, and to glorify God. Jesus' strategy was to bring people into reconciliation with God and the rest of creation so that "in all things" God might be glorified in heaven and on Earth and his creation purposes beautifully fulfilled (1 Pet 4:11).

3. Esthetic/Imaginative Culture

Esthetic/imaginative culture means music, dance, art, drama, poetry, and a range of other gifts and skills.

Not surprisingly, this kind of culture plays a big role in Scripture. Much of the Bible is poetry. Music is mentioned often. The exodus was immediately celebrated by the Israelites singing praise to the Lord (Ex 15:1-19). "Then the prophetess Miriam, Aaron's sister, took a tambourine in her hand; and all the women went out after her with tambourines and with dancing. And Miriam sang to them: 'Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea'" (Ex 15:20-21).

Singing and musical instruments pop up often in Scripture. King David would "improvise on instruments of music" (Amos 6:5). Solomon composed one thousand five songs (1 Kgs 4:32). Singing was always a major part of worship in the Jerusalem temple. Under King David "there was a leader of the singers, and there were songs of praise and thanksgiving to God" (Neh 12:46). God's people are to "tell of [the Lord's] deeds with songs of joy" (Ps 107:22). The Bible also mentions "the song of fools" (Eccl 7:15)!

Isaiah writes, "Sing to the Lord a new song, his praise from the end of the earth!" (Isa 42:10).

Jesus closed the Last Supper with a hymn (Mt 26:30; Mk 14:26). The New Testament church sang "psalms and hymns and spiritual songs" together, "singing and making melody to the Lord" (Eph 5:19). When Christians are joyful, they "should sing songs of praise" (Jas 5:13). Paul and Silas sang hymns in prison at midnight despite wounds from a severe beating (Acts 16:22-25).

The New Creation is full of song! God's redeemed multitudes in heaven sing "the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb: 'Great and amazing are your deeds, Lord God the Almighty! Just and true are your ways, King of the nations! . . . All nations will come and worship before you, for your judgments have been revealed'" (Rev 15:3-4).

Imagination as well as reason enlivens the whole of Scripture. Jesus' parables are intriguingly imaginative. So are the metaphors and images biblical characters use to communicate the Good News, as well as God's judgments. Biblical books like Ezekiel, Daniel, and Revelation—examples of what is called *apocalyptic* literature—are known especially for their use of imaginative images and strange creatures.

God intends that all aspects of esthetic/imaginative culture contribute to human wellbeing, the health and flourishing of creation, and God's glory. Imagination and the various forms of art help us reach beyond the limits of human reason and begin to grasp "the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that [we] may be filled with all the fullness of God" (Eph 3:18-19).

What about faith and spirituality? How do they relate to culture? It would be unbiblical to make faith and things of the spirit a *separate category* from other forms of culture. Too often this is done. The temptation is strong to split spirit and matter into separate spheres. *The world created by God is one.* All dimensions are ecologically intermixed and mutually, symbiotically interdependent. Faith and discipleship are physical because we and the world we inhabit are physical. Jesus' incarnation and resurrection were and remain physical. Hence the New Creation is at one and the same time both physical and spiritual.

Faith, discipleship, and mission are also mental and intellectual. Sometimes in Christian history this has been overemphasized; other times, unrecognized. The healthy biblical balance is a harmonious weaving together of the physical, mental, and imaginative dimensions of faith in our daily walk with God in the Spirit. For discipleship is indeed esthetic and imaginative. Faith gets richer as imagination and art are woven into our Christian life, understanding, and witness.

Vital faith and witness grow through a healthy, God-endowed blending of all dimensions of culture—material/physical, intellectual/mental, and esthetic/imaginative. Body, mind, and spirit.

Walter Isaacson, biographer of Leonardo da Vinci, Benjamin Franklin, Albert Einstein, Steve Jobs, and others, says history's most creative people display "the ability to make connections across disciplines—arts and sciences, humanities and technology." This is a "key to innovation, imagination, and genius," springing from "a joyful instinct to fathom the profound beauties of creation."[4] Isaacson writes mainly of Western culture, but the same thing is true all around the world, in all cultures. Some people are especially gifted in blending these various dimensions. Jesus did, above all! Yet each of us shares these dimensions of culture in some measure.

A fully healthy culture requires full and equal participation of both women and men. Culture is also enriched by difference and diversity. Capacities of analysis and intuition, as well as insight into physical things, differ greatly across the spectrum of gender and cultures. Often women seem more intuitive and men more analytical. Sometimes the opposite appears true. Some cultures seem more attuned to imagination and esthetics; others more slanted toward reason and analysis. The point is, *all these capacities are God's gift*, equally part of the precious image of God in human being.

Not only societies but also churches become more creative and dynamic the more diverse they are. The more attuned they are also to the *Earth*—not just to things of mind and spirit—the more wholesome and life-giving they are.

CULTURE, WORLDVIEW, WORLDSTORY

Cultures are webbed together by a shared worldview. Or they may become fragmented as conflicting worldviews clash.

Worldview is the grid we use to make sense of the cosmos. It is a set of silent assumptions we hold as we navigate life's currents. It is our "sense of the world"—the framework that tells us what is true and important and what is not.

Worldviews answer questions of right and wrong and serve as the basis for countless daily decisions. James Sire defines worldview as "a set of presuppositions (or assumptions) which we hold (consciously or unconsciously) about the basic makeup of our world." Worldviews are "composed of a number of basic presuppositions, more or less self-consistent, generally unquestioned by each person, rarely, if ever, mentioned to one's friends, and only brought to mind when challenged by a foreigner from another ideological universe."[5]

A worldview is our key to the universe. It is the lens through which we see. A credible worldview resolves life's key puzzles:

1. Is there purpose to life? If so, what?
2. What is the design of the universe?
3. How does my life relate to other people, to history, and to the universe?
4. Where is history going? Is there an end or goal?

These are the questions of *purpose, design, relationships*, and the *future*. They deal with the meaning (if any) of life in all its actual and potential dimensions.

Livable worldviews are really *worldstories*. We need not so much a world *view* as a world *story*—a coherent, meaningful tale that we inhabit and that gives purpose and direction to life. The issue is not just how we see the world, but how we experience it; live in its story; find the meaning of our own story there. In the Christian faith, human existence is a story with a future, and the story is not over yet. We find meaning in our own lives as we discover our true identity in Jesus Christ and his body, the church, and in Jesus' promises and kingdom vision.

A big part of Christian discipleship is growing into the Christian story—learning to live and understand as best we can the Christian worldstory, "the breadth and length and height and depth" of God's revelation and "the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge" (Eph 3:18-19). Faithfully following Jesus who both is and embodies the story. This is a key concern of this article—that Jesus' followers today may not only have vital faith in God and hope for the future, but live in the world as agents of the kingdom of God on Earth.[6]

Good and Evil in Culture

Is culture good or bad? Or is it amoral, neutral, standing outside questions of right and wrong?

Culture includes *all* the ways people relate to one other, all the ways they influence each other and are shaped by the world around them, whether physical, social, or spiritual. This means culture shares in both good and evil.

Human beings are created in God's image, and humans create culture. Culture therefore partakes of, reflects, and can magnify all the good that is found in human personality. But human culture also magnifies horrible evil in the world. The world's great art

4. Walter Isaacson, *Leonardo da Vinci* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2017), 2-3.

5. James W. Sire, *The Universe Next Door: A Basic World View Catalog* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1976), 17-18.

6. For more on culture, worldviews, worldstory, and related issues, see Howard A. Snyder, *EarthCurrents: The Struggle for the World's Soul* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), especially chapters 10-20.

displays much of the good found in women and men, and sometimes the evil. Human brutality, injustice, and passive tolerance of wickedness reflect fallen sinfulness. Look at scenes of Jesus' crucifixion!

A big part of Christian discipleship is growing into the Christian story—learning to live and understand as best we can the Christian worldstory, "the breadth and length and height and depth" of God's revelation and "the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge" (Eph 3:18-19). Faithfully following Jesus who both is and embodies the story. This is a key concern of this article—that Jesus' followers today may not only have vital faith in God and hope for the future, but live in the world as agents of the kingdom of God on Earth.

In the United States, we see wickedness in the evils of racism—the lingering poisonous fruit of slavery bringing countless horrible deaths to men, women, and children through lynchings, burnings, drownings, and other forms of violence over two and more centuries. This is on top of centuries of genocidal violence against literally hundreds of indigenous tribes—Cherokee, Potawatomi, Navajo, Illinois, Seneca, Massachusetts, Miami, Sioux, and dozens of others.[7]

In the twentieth century, Nazi death camps in World War II and genocide Cambodia, Rwanda, and elsewhere showed how evil a society can become. And now our twenty-first century already offers many horrendous examples—not just of evil generally, but of evil deeply entrenched in culture.[8] The genocidal treatment of the great Uyghur people in China, the Rohingyas in Burma (Myanmar), and religious and ethnic minorities in many other lands shows how widespread this evil is.

Sin affects and infects culture as it does human persons. As with people, some cultures are morally better and others worse. The same principle applies to the internet and all forms of social media. The internet reflects and intensifies both the good and the bad in culture. It has great potential in both directions. This is its promise and its peril.

Human culture is thus both good and evil. Culture reflects the best and worst of humankind. Over time and in varying contexts human society can magnify the good and diminish the evil, or feed the evil and starve the good.

Looking at cultures around the world and through past ages, we see moral as well as material similarities and differences. Some cultures have flourished over millennia. Others have declined, been destroyed, or gone extinct. In his book Sick Societies, anthropologist Robert Edgerton describes cultures that died or suffered greatly due to unhealthy practices or beliefs. Certain "customs and social institutions in all societies . . . compromise human well-being," Edgerton notes—things like witchcraft, revenge, slavery, infanticide, human sacrifice, torture, female genital mutilation, male domination, rape, feuding, and environmental pollution, among others. Such cultural practices or beliefs "can threaten social survival."[9]

Edgerton writes as an anthropologist, not a Christian. But we see immediately that all the practices he lists violate biblical teachings and the ethics of God's reign. While societies may be "devastated by events beyond their control," Edgerton notes, they may also *destroy themselves* through "beliefs, values, and social institutions that result in senseless cruelty, needless suffering, and monumental folly in their relations among themselves and with other societies and the physical environment." "Traditional beliefs and practices may be useful, . . . but they may also be inefficient, harmful and even deadly."[10]

Edgerton notes that "supernatural beliefs can aid a population in its quest for understanding, explanation, or reassurance, but such beliefs can also contribute to a society's demise." He cites witchcraft and religious wars, especially. "A desire for revenge can also destroy a society."[11]

Edgerton tells of a small tribe in the rainforest of eastern Bolivia. The people showed little love or concern for others in their tribe. They hid food from each other. They abandoned children and elderly folk when they fell ill. They had no clothing, and were often cold and wet. "Hungry, fearful, physically uncomfortable, and without concern for one another," tribe members "did not live long and did not live well."[12] Climate was an obvious factor. But if the tribe had known and lived by the Gospel, their lives could have improved dramatically.

For our purposes, three points are equally important here: 1) cultures reflect both the good and the evil in human beings. 2) Conversely, culture shapes the moral sense and values of its people, for good or evil. 3) Like people, cultures can gradually become morally better or worse, just as they can become more or less prosperous materially. They can destroy themselves

7. See Howard A. Snyder, *Jesus and Pocahontas: Gospel, Mission, and National Myth* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2015; Cambridge, UK: Lutterworth Press, 2015).

8. Unfortunately such tales of culturally-embedded evil can be found throughout all human history, as well as in the Bible.

9. Robert B. Edgerton, *Sick Societies: Challenging the Myth of Primitive Harmony* (New York: The Free Press, 1992), 1.

10. Edgerton, *Sick Societies*, 15.

11. Edgerton, *Sick Societies*, 172, 178.

12. Edgerton, *Sick Societies*, 12-13.

through beliefs and practices that morally, socially, or ecologically are bad or even suicidal. Any person born into a sick society is inescapably harmed and limited by that society.

God's intent with culture, as with people, is that they thrive through a healthy covenant relationship with God, one another, and the Earth. This is basic biblical worldview.

Implications for Mission Practice Today

It will help us be more effective, more redemptive in mission, if we grasp these dimensions of culture and implement this understanding in practical ways.

Three implications:

1. *With this three-dimensional understanding, mission reaches more comprehensively into the various aspects of culture.* The Gospel reaches better into the imaginative and esthetic sectors of culture, not just into the cognitive, intellectual, or more obviously spiritual or religious aspects.
2. *Employing this three-dimensional lens, we broaden the missionary call, the missional opportunities.* We expand the number of missionaries as we see that mission involves a much broader range of spiritual gifts than we may have thought.
3. *In this way, mission becomes more complete and wholistic, more fully transformative.* With a broad cultural understanding of mission, we learn how the Gospel transforms not only the mind, but also the imagination, the emotions, the artistic and musical dimension of people's lives. It better reaches not only "intellectuals" but also artists and musicians and dreamers.

Mission in tri-dimensional practice reaches the culture more deeply and more broadly. And this means more permanently. For culture is carried from generation to generation not only by word and thought, but also by music, art, stories, architecture, agricultural practices, and even by dreams and fantasies.

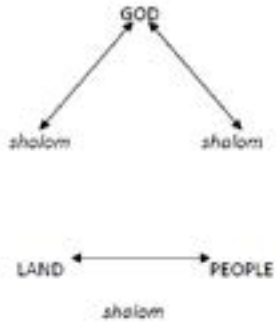
Culture is carried and transmitted by women equally with men; by children and youth, and by the corps of elders. By proverbs, humor, games, and even play.

Mission in tri-dimensional perspective thus better matches and fulfills the comprehensive biblical Economy of God. Biblically, the economy of God leads to everlasting ongoing creativity, beauty, joy, and flourishing of all creation. God's economy—the complete Gospel plan—promises a healed, restored "new heavens and a new earth" (Isa 65:17, 66:22; 2 Pet 3:13). The key Old Testament word for peace, shalom, means comprehensive well-being—healthy people in a thriving land.

Paul writes, "Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. . . . Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ" (1 Cor 15:20, 23). Jesus Christ is the firstfruits of what is coming. In the end, the tree of life continually flourishes with nourishing fruit and "leaves . . . for the healing of the nations" (Rev 22:2).

So Jesus is the prototype as well the redemptive basis of New Creation. He is the bridge and river of coherence between the visible and invisible worlds (Col 1:17).

In the Old Testament, we learn that through Israel God begins a plan to restore creation. God intends shalom, a harmonious, reconciled interrelationship between himself, his people, and the land. The relationships God establishes and intends to fulfil, according to the Bible, look like this:



In the biblical narrative, God creates "the heavens and the earth" (Gen 1:1); he creates humans and places them on Earth; and God plants a garden for the enjoyment and sustenance of the human community. This is a perfect picture of shalom, of the proper mutual relationship between God, humanity, and the Earth.

This perfect ecology of shalom is beautifully captured in a key Old Testament image of Israel at peace: "They shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid" (Mic 4:4). In a measure this happened under King Solomon, when "Israel lived in safety, . . . all of them under their vines and fig trees" (1 Kgs 4:25). But this didn't last. Later, with Israel's destruction and exile, the image becomes an eschatological promise of the kingdom of God in fullness, as in Micah 4:4 and also Zechariah 3:10, "On that day, says the Lord of hosts, you shall invite each other to come under your vine and fig tree." Here is true shalom, peaceful and fruitful harmony between God, people, and the land. Sitting under your own vines and fig trees is a basic biblical image of creation healed. [13]

This Old Testament picture underlies the story of Jesus Messiah in the New Testament. Through the Gospel by the Spirit, God is fulfilling his long intention to bring *shalom* to his whole creation. The Gospel kingdom of God promise encompasses all peoples and the whole Earth. The fulfillment of the Good News of Jesus is creation healed.

Biblically then, salvation means creation healed. And even more. salvation means creation flourishing.

13. Similarly, the devastation of vines and fig trees becomes an image of judgment: The enemy "shall eat up your vines and your fig trees" (Jer. 5:17); "I will lay waste her vines and her fig trees" (Hos 2:12)—which in turn illuminates some of Jesus' actions and parables. See also 2 Kgs 18:31, 1 Macc 14:12.

When we fall ill, we hope to be healed not just so we can survive, but so we can thrive. So we can continue to develop, to create, to grow in wisdom, to help others, to more fully glorify God—to flourish in all the ways God provides. So also in the larger picture of God's plan and purpose. God's economy is more than salvation as commonly understood, more than creation healed. It is creation flourishing unendingly to God's glory. God's work is not just restorative. It is creative, generative, beautifully bountiful.

Salvation is not just reversing direction, not a mere return to the starting point. The plan is to liberate all creation for God's original and unending project. Rather than just a return to square one, salvation means freeing creation to move and expand everlastingly in the opposite—that is, the right, good, beautiful, and bountiful—direction.

Salvation means creation healed. But shalom in fullness means ongoing health, beauty, creativity, and even more, with many wondrous surprises. It means all creation reaching its full good, glorious, pure, and poetic, artful potential. What this means fully, no one knows! Except Holy Trinity. "No eye has seen, no ear heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him" (1 Cor 2:9 NIV).

The economy of God is the flourishing of creation in all its complexity. God's economy is cultural, political, economic, ecological, symbiotic. Every dimension included. Because the economy of God is spiritual in the full biblical sense, it is therefore cultural, economic, artistic, political, musical, all according to Yahweh's original and ongoing intention.

The larger picture, then, looks a bit like this:

From Creation Healed to Creation Flourishing

How big is God's oikos and oikonomia?

The economy of God brings a complete cure—and more. Colin Gunton expressed this beautifully in his little book *Christ and Creation*: "What is the end of creation? That all things may through being perfected praise the one who made them." He added, "what we call redemption is not a new end, but the achievement of the original purpose of creation. . . . What is realized in the incarnate involvement of the Son in time and space is the *redirection of the creation to its original destiny*, a destiny that was from the beginning in Christ, for all creation is through and to the Son."[14]

Thus the full economy of God leads to the everlasting ongoing creativity, beauty, joy, and flowering of all creation. The full reality of this is beyond our grasp, as Paul suggests in 1 Corinthians 2:9. Its fullest biblical picture is in Revelation 21:

I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away." And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true." Then he said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life. Those who conquer will inherit these things, and I will be their God and they will be my children" (Rev 21:3-7).

This is the economy of God viewed from the climax, looking back.

14. Colin E. Gunton, *Christ and Creation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 94-96 (emphasis added). This reflects Jn 1, Col 1, and Heb 1, especially.

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