

Toward a Biblical Understanding of Culture



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Approaches to Culture



- ❧ Christ Above Culture
- ❧ Christ Against Culture
- ❧ Christ and Culture in Paradox
- ❧ Christ the Transformer of Culture

Approaches to Culture



- ❧ The Christendom Approach
- ❧ The Separatist Approach
- ❧ The Two-Kingdom Approach
- ❧ The Transformationalist Approach

Missional Definition of Culture



Culture is “the sum total of ways of living built up by a human community and transmitted from one generation to another.”

Lesslie Newbigin, *The Other Side of 1984: Questions for the Churches* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1983), 5.

Anthropological Definition of Culture



Culture is “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.”

Edward B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art, and Custom*. (London: John Murray, 1871), 1.

Culture



- ❧ Tylor: “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.”
- ❧ Newbign: “the sum total of ways of living built up by a human community and transmitted from one generation to another.”

Culture



- ❧ Culture is neutral.
- ❧ Religion is a component of culture.

“Race”-related Terms



- ❧ ἔθνος (*ethnos*).
- ❧ Matthew 28:19-20 “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations [*ethnē*], baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”
- ❧ “a multitude (whether of men or of beasts) associated or living together, . . . a multitude of individuals of the same nature or genus, . . . a race, nation, people group”
- ❧ “a people, a large group based on various cultural, physical or geographic ties.”

“Race”-related Terms



- ❧ Revelation 5:9 “And they sang a new song, saying, “Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe [*phulēs*] and language [*glōssēs*] and people [*laōŷ*] and nation [*ethnous*].”
- ❧ φυλή (*phulē*; “tribe”)
- ❧ γλῶσσα (*glōssa*; “language”)
- ❧ λαός (*laos*; “people”)

“Race”-related Terms



- ❧ 1 Peter 2:9: “But you are a chosen race [*genos*], a royal priesthood, a holy nation [*ethnos*], a people [*laos*] for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.”
- ❧ γένος (*genos*; “race”)

“World”-related Terms



- ❧ αἰών (*aiōn*; “age,” “world”) and κόσμος (*kosmos*; “world”)
- ❧ John 17:14-16: “I have given them your word, and the world [*kosmos*] has hated them because they are not of the world [*kosmou*], just as I am not of the world [*kosmou*]. I do not ask that you take them out of the world [*kosmou*], but that you keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world [*kosmou*], just as I am not of the world [*kosmou*].”

“World”-related Terms



- ❧ 1 John 2:15-17: “Do not love the world [*kosmon*] or the things in the world [*kosmō*]. If anyone loves the world [*kosmon*], the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world [*kosmō*]—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life—is not from the Father but is from the world [*kosmou*]. And the world [*kosmos*] is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever.”

“World”-related Terms



- ❧ Romans 12:2 “Do not be conformed to this world [*aiōn*], but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.”

“Behavior”-related Terms



- ❧ ἀναστροφή (*anastrophē*) — “life, as made up of actions; mode of life, conduct, deportment.”

Bullinger, *A Critical Lexicon and Concordance to the English and Greek New Testament*, 186.

- ❧ “For you have heard of my former life [*ποτε anastrophēn*] in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it” (Gal 1:13).

“Behavior”-related Terms



✧ Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles [*ethnē*] do, in the futility of their minds. They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity. But that is not the way you learned Christ!—assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus, to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life [*anastrophē*] and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness (Eph 4:17-24).

“Behavior”-related Terms



- ❧ 1 Peter 1:13-19: “Therefore, preparing your minds for action, and being sober-minded, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct [*anastrophē*], since it is written, “You shall be holy, for I am holy.” And if you call on him as Father who judges impartially according to each one’s deeds [*ergon*], conduct yourselves [*anastrophēte*] with fear throughout the time of your exile, knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways [*anastrophēs*] inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot.”

“Behavior”-related Terms



- ❧ 1 Peter 2:12: “Keep your conduct [*anastrophēn*] among the Gentiles [*ethnesin*] honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds [*ergōn*] and glorify God on the day of visitation.”
- ❧ 1 Peter 3:1-2: “Likewise, wives, be subject to your own husbands, so that even if some do not obey the word, they may be won without a word by the conduct [*anastrophēs*] of their wives, when they see your respectful and pure conduct [*anastrophēn*].”

“Behavior”-related Terms



- ❧ 1 Peter 3:15-16: “But in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior [*anastrophēn*] in Christ may be put to shame.”

“Culture” in the NT



- ❧ “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, arts, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (Tylor)
- ❧ “the sum total of ways of living built up by a human community and transmitted from one generation to another” (Newbigin).
- ❧ ἀναστροφή (*anastrophē*) — “life, as made up of actions; mode of life, conduct, deportment.”

Implications



❧ Unholy culture exists

- ❧ “For you have heard of my former life (*anastrophēn*) in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it” (Gal 1:13).
- ❧ Peter speaks of “the sensual conduct (*anastrophēs*) of the wicked” (2 Pet 2:7) and “those who live (*anastrophomenous*) in error” (2 Peter 2:18).

Implications



- ❧ Christians are redeemed from unholy culture.
- ❧ Paul says that even believers “once lived (*anastrophēmen*) in the passions of [their] flesh” (Eph 2:3), but through Christ, God has raised believers out of such unholy behavior (vv. 5-6).
- ❧ This is why Paul commands Christians later in Ephesians 4:22 to “put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life (*anastrophēn*).”
- ❧ Believers are to actively reject the sinful behavior that flows from sinful values expressly because they are “ransomed from the futile ways (*anastrophēs*)” (1 Pet 1:18).

Implications



- ❧ Fundamental antithesis exists between the values of Christians and unbelievers, but not always between their behaviors.
- ❧ For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do (*poieō*) what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them (Rom 2:14-15).

Implications



- ❧ Holy values ought to affect every aspect of a Christian's behavior.
 - ❧ “By his good conduct (*anastrophēs*) let him show his works” (Jas 3:13).
 - ❧ “Be holy in all [their] conduct (*anastrophē*)” (1 Peter 1:15).
 - ❧ Paul commands Timothy to set an example “in conduct (*anastrophē*)” (1 Tim 4:12).
 - ❧ After commanding believers to put off the “old self, which belongs to [their] former [culture]” (Eph 4:22), he details several different areas in which the new self will manifest itself, including relationships with neighbors (v. 25), work ethic (v. 28), and communication (v. 29). The outcome of new values is new culture in every aspect of life.

Implications



- ❧ The relationship between holy culture and unholy culture should be one of witness.
- ❧ “Keep your conduct (*anastrophēn*) among the Gentiles honorable” so that “they may see your good deeds (*ergōn*) and glorify God on the day of visitation” (1 Peter 2:12).

Implications



- ❧ Only holy culture will remain.
- ❧ “Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives (*anastrophais*) of holiness and godliness” (1 Peter 3:11).

The Sanctificationist Approach to Culture



- ❧ 1 Peter 1:17-18: “And if you call on him as Father who judges impartially according to each one’s deeds (*ergōn*), conduct yourselves (*anastrophēte*) with fear throughout the time of your exile, knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways (*anastrophēs*) inherited from your forefathers.”