

## Introduction

The importance of “culture” for theology has been a preoccupation from the late nineteenth to the twenty-first centuries. What follows is a guide to this discussion. It is not intended as an exhaustive analysis nor a definitive statement of this preoccupation. No single book could possibly achieve this, let alone a little guide such as this one. My hope is that interested readers might use this guide to begin a fuller study on this important preoccupation. This guide is intended to introduce readers into why this conversation matters and why, for better or worse, it will continue to do so. I think this preoccupation has a great deal to do with the conflicts, tensions, and stresses in the life of the contemporary church. Thus a good understanding of it could go a long way in helping us work through some of these conflicts, tensions, and stresses. Many of the impasses we face result from our inherited answers to the question how we should relate theology and culture. Often those inherited answers are repackaged under new names and called “new and improved.” Some critical examination of them might move us beyond many of our well-worn theological debates. What follows then is a guide to the discussion, but it is by no means intended to be neutral or objective. It seeks to chart a direction (or directions) that might move us through this

preoccupation with culture while retaining what is so essential to it. Although it is neither neutral nor objective, I do hope it is generous and liberal toward those with whom it will be clear I differ. Above all, of course, I hope it is true.

The discussion begins with lesson 1 by quickly noting the promises and perils of the modern preoccupation with the relationship between theology and culture. The promise is that we can and must speak about God within our cultural context. Of course, that is also inevitable. No one could possibly speak about God otherwise, which raises the question why we moderns think this claim that we must speak about God without our cultural context is either controversial or revelatory. It is a truism such as we must move our legs in order to walk from one place to the next. The peril is that we will begin to think and act as if our speaking of God only has to do with our cultural context, as if we cannot speak about the same God in different languages, times and cultures and recognize it is the same God.

The next four lessons, lessons 2–5, offer a very quick overview of the meaning and uses of the term culture. We begin by asking the basic question in lesson 2, “What is culture?” Nearly everyone uses the term, and everyone seems to have “culture,” but when we try to explain what we mean by culture and how we use it, we run up against difficulties. Culture was once defined over and against “nature,” but that term has become as complex and contested as culture. As noted in lesson 3, those two terms are increasingly confused. The confusion arises, in part, from the recognition of the importance of language in modern philosophy. Even if you the reader never had a course in philosophy, or never heard

of the phrase, “the linguistic turn,” this philosophical moment has most likely affected your life in some way. If you attend church, it most certainly has affected your life for it is one of the main reasons we have been preoccupied with the question of how to relate theology and culture. Lesson 4 examines language. It does so in order to arrive in lesson 5 at some recognition of the diverse ways in which we use the term culture. Only at this point can we enter into the discussion that matters most—“culture and God,” which is the theme of the midpoint of the guide in lesson 6. We will of course address this theme throughout every lesson. It is what matters most. However, lesson 6 raises questions as to how we can speak of God, and how we can do so with any good conscience, when we realize that so many different cultures speak of God in diverse languages. These questions then get addressed by examining a number of important theological responses. Those responses are divided into two sets. The first set, lessons 7–9, examine some distinctly modern responses. The second set, lessons 11 and 12, examine some postmodern responses. In between these two sets of responses is lesson 10, a discussion of the importance of the cultures of modernity and postmodernity. What might we mean when we use those terms? This guide seeks to chart where we have been so that we might have some sense as to where we are going. Having been raised on a river I have always been fond of a metaphor used by Gerhard Lohfink. Theology is like rowing a boat. You can only move forward when you are looking backwards. The difficulty is that when the river is swift you may not wind up where you would like to be. This guide seeks to land us safely on the other side by thinking about where we have been. The

currents of modern/postmodern culture are so rapid that I do not know if the guide points in the right direction. For that reason, it is at most an invitation to an ongoing discussion. Why has contemporary theology and the church been so preoccupied with the question of culture? Should we continue that preoccupation or move through it to something more, such as the question of truth? If or when we do so (it is inevitable), how might we maintain what we rightly learned from this preoccupation?

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