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CHAPTER 1

What Is *Culture*?

IN THE WANING MONTHS of 2009, I became aware of a curriculum—book, DVD, and leader’s guide—titled *Deadly Viper Character Assassins: A Kung Fu Guide for Life and Leadership*. The material was attempting to employ a Kung Fu martial arts theme in order to communicate concepts of leadership integrity. As I found out more about the curriculum, I discovered that its authors had been using caricatures of Asian culture, specifically images of ninjas and Kung Fu warriors, in a way that would offend many in the Asian-American community (both Christian and non-Christian).

There were numerous examples of the material playing into Asian stereotypes, including the conflation of different Asian cultures, the misuse of Chinese characters, the portrayal of Asians as sinister villains, the portrayal of Asian women as geishas, and even a video clip with Caucasians speaking in a faux Chinese accent. The positive intention of the authors was to present leadership and integrity in a fun manner, particularly to men. What the material ended up doing, however, was creating

a deep and very real offense toward the Asian-American community.

Through cyberspace and the blogosphere, more and more people heard about the offensive curriculum and a significant outcry of opposition and protest was raised. While not limited to the Asian-American community, it was understandably Asian-American voices who raised the loudest opposition. Over the course of two weeks, much online conversation and dialogue occurred that became quite heated at times. To the credit of the authors and the publishers, the publishing company chose to withdraw the materials (both the book version and the online content). The authors and the publishers recognized that intentionally or not, they had committed a significant offense against the Asian-American community.

What struck me was how well-meaning individuals could create a product that generated a serious affront toward the Asian-American—or, in fact, any—community. A noticeable gap in the level of cultural sensitivity between those in majority culture and ethnic minorities was evident. Those who are a part of the majority culture have the luxury of ignoring the culture of others, since the dominant culture is the majority culture. On the other hand, ethnic minorities are keenly aware of their minority status and are alert to potential cultural insensitivities.

One of the major issues that arose during the heated dialogue around the *Deadly Viper* material was the confusion about the role and importance of culture. Some who wanted to continue to make the material available despite its offensive nature believed that the culture of a people was irrelevant and therefore subject to use by any people, whether they were a part of that culture or not.

In response to the announcement that the material was being pulled, one blog respondent stated: “It is sad to see that people in the Christian community place higher emphasis on their culture than on the work God is doing.” The implication of this statement is that culture is not God’s doing but rather a human product that stands beneath the

work of God. The use of culture as a tool, therefore, supersedes its being honored and respected as part of God's sovereign work.

Is culture merely a human creation or is it ordained by God? If culture is merely a human construct, it is disposable and can be tossed aside. Human cultures will not stand or be upheld in the greater work of God's church. If, however, culture is ordained by God, then the pursuit of understanding culture and an increased sensitivity to cultural differences is worthwhile. H. Richard Niebuhr's juxtaposition of Christ AGAINST Culture with Christ OF Culture (with all the mediating positions in between) reveals the conflict experienced by many in the church.¹ Some may see culture as a strictly human (maybe even a demonic) construct that the church needs to stand AGAINST. Or some may see culture as a pure, divine construct that the church unequivocally needs to be a part OF.

Our understanding and preconceived notions about culture can determine how the church ultimately relates to the culture in which it finds itself. The first step toward cultural intelligence and competency for the church is an examination of what preconceived ideas we may harbor, and then developing a biblical-theological understanding of culture.

Grading Culture

In our everyday conversation, it is easy for words to be used carelessly until they lose their real meaning. Our speech can quickly become trite and filled with meaningless jargon and clichés. The word "culture" has fallen victim to this fate. If we were to poll a group of pastors or lay leaders for a definition of culture, we would field a wide range of answers. One use of the word "culture" is as an adjective, as in, that person is very "cultured," implying that there is a hierarchy at work. There are those who may see one culture as having a higher standing over and above another. To be "cultured," therefore, means the acquisition of one particular culture leading to a person becoming "cultured."

When gradations are placed on culture, we begin to put value judgments on which one is superior to another. For example, in *All God's Children and Blue Suede Shoes*, Kenneth Myers asserts that there are three types of culture: high culture, folk culture, and low culture.²

Myers categorizes “high” culture as culture arising from a European heritage. “High” culture is Bach, Rembrandt, classical music, European art, and the theater (ballet and opera, not Broadway musicals). “Low” culture is Bon Jovi, Michael Jackson’s *Thriller*, Andy Warhol’s soup cans, television that is not *Masterpiece Theater*, and other expressions of pop culture. The “high” culture of Europe stood far above “low” popular culture.

Myers created a third category that he labeled as “folk” culture. “Folk” was a step above “low” but a step below “high” culture. “Folk” culture was African drumming, Korean fan dancing, or Native American jewelry. In this schema, culture that was of European origin was “high” (implied better) and closer to God, while folk culture (usually the culture of non-Western society) was a grade below European culture. The implication of these categories is that some cultures are superior to others. An additional implication in this gradation is the closeness of one culture over another to God’s will and plan for creation.

The belief in a hierarchy of culture usually results in a bias toward Western and European culture, understood as being higher and better than non-Western expressions. A “cultured” person, therefore, is someone who is well-versed in Western or European expressions of culture. This bias means that Western culture often has the authority to define and shape other cultural expressions, since it is superior to other cultures. Gradation of culture, therefore, can lead to a disrespecting of certain cultures and ultimately an expression of cultural incompetency.

Can we approach culture from a perspective that honors human effort to construct culture as well as God’s presence and work within the culture? Our definition of culture, therefore, must reflect existing an-

thropological and sociological definitions that do not reflect social and political biases, at the same time deriving an understanding of culture from a biblical framework.

Defining Culture

A healthy approach to culture has a biblical and theological foundation. It is important, however, that we also have a broader definition of culture that not only reflects sound theology but also draws on an existing common understanding in our society about culture. For the purposes of this book, we will begin our inquiry into the definition of “culture” by considering the manner in which anthropologists use the word. For example, one definition is a “shared (collective within society), socially learned knowledge, and patterns of behavior.”³ Culture is “acquired knowledge, lived experience, that helps you navigate the society you live in and provides guidelines for your interaction with others.”⁴ Culture, therefore, operates on both the individual level as well as the societal level. One may acquire culture individually, but apply culture socially.

The etymology of the word also informs our understanding and use of the word. “The word ‘culture’ comes from the Latin *colere*, meaning to cultivate. It indicates mankind’s environment as shaped and patterned by the whole of human activity. Culture is the core and driving force of civilization both ancient and modern.”⁵ Anthropologist Clifford Geertz notes that our knowledge of culture grows in spurts. “Culture is not inherited like a genetic code. Instead, culture becomes layers and layers added by our society and our surrounding environment.”⁶ These definitions of culture recognize that though culture is shaped by humans, it also shapes and forms individuals.

Culture is foundational in social life. It “denotes a historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men

communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life.”⁷

Culture may operate on three levels: (1) behaviors that are learned, (2) ideas that reinforce beliefs and values, and (3) products that reinforce beliefs. The three key concepts reveal that culture can be seen as a product (such as food, music, and art), but that those products reinforce a cultural belief system and arise out of and reflect a set of underlying ideas and values. In addition, behaviors are at work that shape value systems as well as what is produced by the culture. In each of these anthropological definitions, we see the important impact of culture on the individual but also its place in shaping social systems and contexts.

Another definition that I personally find to be helpful explains culture through the lens of technology: “the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others.”⁸ To put it simply: culture is the software of the mind. “Culture as mental software corresponds to a much broader use of the word than is common among sociologists and, especially, anthropologists.”⁹

Let’s explore the technology example a bit further. Computer hardware is your physical desktop or laptop computer. On a basic level, all computers operate the same way—whether a Mac, Dell, Asus, or any other computer brand. Often, what distinguishes one computer from another is the software, more than the hardware.

When you first purchased your laptop computer, you received hardware—the processor, hard drive, screen, and a whole bunch of other technology that we may not understand. Hardware, however, does not necessarily determine the computer’s programming, and by itself is insufficient to run the machine. You need software, which is installed onto the hardware, in order to operate the computer.

Software is the set of programs that gives a specific function and a specific type of production for the computer. The software that gets in-

stalled onto the hardware will determine how it functions. Culture as software means that “patterns of thinking, feeling, and acting *mental programs*, or . . . *software of the mind* . . . indicate what reactions are likely and understandable.”¹⁰

As software helps your hardware to run, we acquire the software of culture. Through our cultural context and our social experiences, the software of culture is downloaded. “The source of one’s mental programs lies within the social environments in which one grew up and collected one’s life experiences.”¹¹ Hardware may have severe limitations on how it may be used, while software—like cultural software—has a degree of flexibility and adaptability.

Can software be rewritten? To take the computer illustration to the next step means to understand the individual application of software. Though a robust understanding of culture is essential, we must also recognize that individuals are both shaped by culture and defined by personality. So while culture offers the software that runs the hardware, different individuals may apply that software in different ways.

One time I was taking notes on my laptop during a church board meeting and needed to access my spreadsheet software to crunch some numbers. While I’m familiar enough with spreadsheets, the extent of my expertise goes about as far as keeping track of basic baseball statistics. Two people reacted in distinctly different ways to my fumbling with the spreadsheet. One person looked away, explaining that he made it a practice to not see how others used a spreadsheet since that might negatively influence how he worked in MS Excel. In other words, my inefficiency with the spreadsheet could potentially damage his efficient method of working with the program. The second reaction came from another board member, who observed my several minutes of inept fumbling, sighed, and said, “You’re killing me here.” She proceeded to take the laptop and manipulate the spreadsheet and derive the answer in a matter of seconds.

The program that was being used was the same for all three of us and was affected by my ineptitude. The software that had been installed was the same program on each of our computers. However, different individuals were using the software to differing impact and efficiency. In the same way that culture may be described as software, there must also be the consideration that software may have different expressions and applications per individual user.

Our definition of culture, therefore, must take into account the social level as well as the individual level. Cultural intelligence deals with an understanding of culture that has multiple layers. Even as we begin to apply these definitions of culture to the local church setting, our anthropological definition and technological illustration calls for a stretching of our simplistic assumptions about the topic. Culture is more complex than simply a set of traditions or knowledge that we add on to other types of knowledge. Cultural intelligence takes on another level of complexity when we consider the biblical-theological aspects of culture.

God's Image and God's Culture

To explore and understand the role of culture from a biblical framework, we must go all the way back to the creation story in Genesis. The idea that humanity has been given a responsibility and duty from the Creator to go forth and create culture originates from the theological understanding that humanity was made in the image of God. This concept is known as the cultural mandate, which calls for believers to engage rather than categorically reject the surrounding culture, and arises out of the doctrine of the image of God.

The doctrine of the image of God reveals that we bear a likeness to God in our spiritual capacity. Humanity “bears and reflects the divine likeness among the inhabitants of the earth, because he is a spirit, an intelligent, voluntary agent.”¹² Because God is a spiritual being, our like-

ness to God would be reflected in our spirituality. We have a spiritual rather than a physical likeness to God. Regardless of our racial, ethnic, national, or cultural identity, we are each a spiritual image-bearer of God. “We could search the world over, but we could not find a man so low, so degraded, or so far below the social, economic and moral norms . . . that he had not been created in the image of God.”¹³ This spiritual likeness, therefore, would be found in all humanity, regardless of race and ethnicity. Being made in the image of God is a gift endowed upon all humanity.

“God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground’” (Genesis 1:26). Because we are made in the image of God, we hold a unique position in creation order. The passage connects the unmatched quality of being made in the image of God with the responsibility of dominion over creation. God’s sovereign authority over creation is mirrored in a small way by the stewardship of creation by humanity. “Because man is created in God’s image, he is king over nature. He rules the world on God’s behalf.”¹⁴ Dominion over creation comes with an obligation rather than a *carte blanche* authority. “Mankind is here commissioned to rule nature as a benevolent king, acting as God’s representative over them and therefore treating them in the same way as God who created them.”¹⁵ The image of God leads to the spiritual capacity of humanity to hold an affirming and positive position in creation order. That position results in a responsibility to further the creative work of God.

Be Fruitful and Culture-fy

Because we were created with a spiritual capacity to reflect the character of God, we also possess the capacity to re-create God’s image through procreation. That spiritual capacity extends to our ability to

create culture. The focus and main thrust of Genesis 1 is God's creative power at work. If God's creation is culminated in human beings and the subsequent endowment of His image on them, then the Genesis 1 passage implies that a key component of that endowment is the ability to create. As Andy Crouch asserts in *Culture Making*, "Splashed all over the page [in Genesis 1] is God's purposeful and energetic desire to create."¹⁶ Does it not stand to reason that if that key attribute is the focus of Genesis 1, then the receiving of the ability to create is a key element of being made in the image of God? Humanity, therefore, has the unique ability to reflect the creative capacity of our maker.

Our first expression is our capacity to procreate and to perpetuate the image of God through our offspring, the possibility of which is the promise of God found in Genesis. "Within these promises, that of being fruitful and multiplying . . . is central. . . . If God's blessing is in one sense the perpetuation of God's creative activity, it also enables man to imitate God by procreating."¹⁷ However, this ability to procreate is a capacity possessed by the animals as well. Therefore, it is not merely our ability to procreate that reflects the image of God but also our creative capacity to create culture. Andy Crouch asks, "What does it mean to be not just culturally aware but culturally responsible? Not just culture consumers or even just culture critics, but culture makers."¹⁸

This concept of being a culture maker emerges out from the passage in Genesis 1:28: "Be fruitful and increase in number." Genesis 1:28 is usually interpreted as the expression of the cultural mandate. While this phrase may leave room for a wide range of interpretations as well as misinterpretation, it is a concept that conveys the importance of culture to human life. The Genesis 1:28 verse reveals "a connection between being made in the image of God and the ability to mirror God through the re-creation of God's image through culture."¹⁹ Genesis 1:28 reminds us that part of creation order is to go forth and create life, families, social

systems, and cultures. Nancy Pearcey describes the cultural mandate in the following way:

The first phrase, “be fruitful and multiply,” means to develop the *social* world: build families, churches, schools, cities, governments, laws. The second phrase, “subdue the earth,” means to harness the *natural* world: plant crops, build bridges, design computers, compose music. This passage is sometimes called the Cultural Mandate because it tells us that our original purpose was to create cultures, build civilizations.²⁰

Cultures, therefore, are not inherently evil, but rather are an expression by fallen humanity to live into the high calling of the *Imago Dei*. We need not view culture with an “all bad” perspective, but instead as a sincere, albeit fallen, attempt to reflect God’s image through the process of creativity.

The Mission of God Evident in Culture

Our goal in cultural intelligence, therefore, is not to erase cultural differences but rather to seek ways to honor the presence of God in different cultures. When we are dealing with cross-cultural and multicultural ministry, it is important to see God at work in all cultures, not just in one. The theological concept of *missio Dei* provides a crucial consideration to this discussion. The term *missio Dei* arises out of the biblical-theological understanding that mission is God’s initiative. “Mission is, primarily and ultimately, the work of the Triune God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier, for the sake of the world, a ministry in which the church is privileged to participate.”²¹ From the very beginning, it has been God at work reaching out to lost humanity. God’s voice ringing out, “Where are you?” in the garden of Eden is a reminder that God pursues and looks for us. “Mission is the result of God’s initiative, rooted in God’s purposes to restore and heal creation. ‘Mission’ means ‘sending,’ and it is the central biblical theme describing the purpose of God’s action in human history.”²²

When we consider the work of God throughout human history, we need to acknowledge that God's plan of redemption has been at work before the church even existed, that He is present in different places even before the Western missionaries show up. "Mission is God's turning to the world in respect of creation, care, redemption, and consummation. It takes place in ordinary human history, not exclusively in and through the church. The *missio Dei* is God's activity that embraces both the church and the world, and in which the church may be privileged to participate."²³ The approach of *missio Dei*, therefore, means that there is sensitivity and awareness of the preexisting work of God in culture. If God has been at work, then His work in the world precedes any human effort and work. As Paul DeNeui puts it, "As a missionary . . . it was always comforting to realize that I did not bring God along with my physical and cultural baggage to my new host country."²⁴

For example, in Acts 17, the apostle Paul appeals to the preexisting notion among the Athenians of an "unknown God" when bringing the good news of Jesus. Paul observes that the Athenians have an "altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. [Paul proceeds to assert that] now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you" (v. 23). Paul appeals to the preexisting elements of that culture in order to plead the case for Christ. While acknowledging that the Athenians were lacking the full knowledge of God, the apostle Paul believes that He had already begun to reveal Himself to them, through the expression of an unknown god. Paul even goes so far as to say that "we are God's offspring" (v. 29), implying that Paul shares the common parentage of God with the Athenians. In other words, Paul, the pious Jewish Christian, shares the image of God with the pagan Athenians; therefore, God's work (no matter how minuscule) had already begun among the Athenians. Paul shows respect for the culture of the Athenians, while pointing them to a fuller understanding of the gospel message.

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A similar story occurs in Peter's interaction with Cornelius in Acts 10. In a vision (vv. 9–16) God instructs Peter to eat foods the law had deemed unclean. As a law-abiding Jew, he recoils at the thought of compromising his cultural identity. But the voice in the vision makes the declaration to Peter: "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean" (v. 15).

God had already been at work in Cornelius's life. Not only had Cornelius been seeking Him through his lifestyle of generosity, but God sent a vision of an angel to him (vv. 1–8), who told him God knew of his good works, and directed him to seek out Peter. When Peter does come to minister to Cornelius, he recognizes that God has already been at work and recognizes that these Gentile believers will receive the same salvation as the Jewish believers. Peter said, "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts those from every nation who fear him and do what is right" (Acts 10:34–35). God's mission was being fulfilled among the Gentiles, and Peter was allowed to participate in the mission of God.

Understanding the implication of *missio Dei* means that we acknowledge the power of God to work in all cultures. If mission is God's work, then God's plan is manifest not only in those being sent out into the world, but in those throughout the world with whom He has already been at work. The church is not the end all and be all of the gospel message—that position belongs to God alone. As Darrell Guder points out, "The church of Jesus Christ is not the purpose or goal of the gospel, but rather its instrument and witness."²⁵ Because of God's sovereign, ongoing work, He is able to work through the culture to bring about His redemption. "Culture, with all its merits and limitations, has played a fundamental role in God's self-disclosure in human history. Divine revelation does not come in a vacuum. It can only come with reference to culture—i.e., in relation to the religious environment, language, and understanding of man."²⁶ The mission of God means that God's work is

evident through the specific revelation of Jesus Christ, but also through the general revelation of creation *and* culture. God's wisdom in planning redemptive history leads us to an appreciation of the myriad of cultures in the world.

Corporate Cultural Responsibility

We can see the good work of God in the different cultures that have been created, but we must also recognize the fallen nature of collective human efforts. As we appreciate the working of God's image in an individual, though fallen, we must also appreciate the working of God's image in corporate culture as we recognize the fallen nature of corporate culture. When we try to define and understand culture, we can take a too limiting view that hinders our cultural intelligence. Some of the inability of American Christianity to understand the corporate and social nature of culture arises from the excessive individualism entrenched in Western culture.

For instance, if we were to view culture strictly through the lens of excessive individualism, our view on culture would be myopic; our attempt to understand it would be a largely irrelevant and fruitless endeavor. Any effort to understand or work within a cultural framework should be subservient to the true work of changing individuals. Dealing with culture would be a waste of time, given that this culture would actually be hindering the work of saving individuals. Because American evangelicalism tends to reduce everything to a personal application, we limit the way we engage with the culture around us.

Culture, however, is a corporate social creation. Therefore, for those of us for whom personal and individual faith is paramount, our social life becomes subservient to our personal life—which leads to the incorrect assumption that our personal life has authority over and overrules our corporate and common life. Many of us, therefore, may have preconceived notions about how to deal with cultural realities.

The reality of a fallen culture requires living holy personal lives, but we do so in a sociocultural setting in order to address the needs of a fallen culture. In other words, we cannot escape the need to deal with the corporate nature of culture. If we reduce our faith to purely individualistic terms, then we lack the capacity to deal with culture on corporate, societal terms. Individual salvation is essential to our soteriology, but our transformation in Christ should extend beyond personal experience to the influence we have on the culture. Scripture leads us to the reality of corporate as well as individual sin, and calls us to consider both individual and corporate components of life.

Jeremiah's Lament

Second Kings 25 relates the story of the siege of Jerusalem by the Babylonians. Jerusalem was destroyed and its residents taken into exile. The ruthless Babylonians followed a scorched earth policy, which meant that they would burn and salt the fields and fill up the wells of the deposed foes. They were particularly merciless to the city of Jerusalem, since its citizens had resisted them. The situation in Jerusalem was grim, and a situation well worthy of lament.

The book of Lamentations contains the prophet Jeremiah's wailings over fallen Jerusalem. Because Jeremiah had spoken against Jerusalem, the Babylonians allowed him to remain and consequently express this lament. It is interesting that Jeremiah would engage in this deeply felt lament and confession on behalf of the people of Jerusalem, since he had actually been vindicated by this invasion. He had been the sole, true voice of God foretelling God's coming judgment. Jeremiah would be the one resident of Jerusalem who would be without blame and fault. He had been right all along, and now would be the perfect time to say, "I told you so." Instead, Jeremiah laments. He weeps and wails for the loss of Jerusalem.

In Lamentations 1, there is a shift from the third person "she" (re-

ferring to Jerusalem) to the first person “I.” Jeremiah confesses that “my sins . . . have come upon my neck” (1:14). Throughout Lamentations, we see Jeremiah confess the corporate sins of Jerusalem. “Let *us* examine *our* ways and test them, and let *us* return to the Lord. . . . *We* have sinned and rebelled” (3:40–42) and “woe to *us*, for *we* have sinned” (5:16, italics mine). Despite being the one person who has been faithful to God, Jeremiah takes responsibility for the corporate sin of his people. Jeremiah makes “full confession of sin on behalf of the apostate people and their leaders as the first step toward claiming divine forgiveness and restoration.”²⁷ Jeremiah is not focused exclusively on his individuality, but he is willing to take on responsibility and raise a lament for the corporate sins of Jerusalem. Jeremiah understands the corporate aspect of sin and repentance.

Our theological language must begin to reflect this appreciation of the corporate elements of Scripture. There is the corporate sense of sin that Jeremiah confesses and there is the corporate sense of redemption that God promises based on the repentance of His people. What should be our role in not only calling individuals to repentance and faith but cultures as well? How do we live in the tension of the now and the not yet—on both an individual and a corporate level? How do we begin to recognize that God’s work in individuals should collectively affect the society in significant ways? How can we move toward a kingdom ethic in the world today, rather than merely waiting for the end of the world as we know it?

Cultures and the Construct of Social Reality

In order to more effectively understand the corporate nature of culture, it is helpful to investigate how a cultural social system forms and how it works. Sociologists Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann reflect on this topic, and their perspective is helpful in understanding the role and impact of culture on both the individual and on the corporate

system. Berger and Luckmann describe a three-step process that leads to the creation of a social system (in our discussion, a cultural system) that is shaped by the individual and that also shapes the individual.²⁸

The first step is the process of externalization. When a group of individuals come together, they have the capacity to externalize individual identity and values to the group. This first level recognizes that individual values are critical in the formation of corporate identity. Each individual brings a specific set of experiences and values to the system. The group identity draws on them and their unique contribution and specific externalization.

Here's an example. When I first set out to plant a multiethnic church, I gathered a group of individuals together to begin dreaming what such a church could look like. Each individual came with a set of expectations, some specific personal experiences, and a set of values that were voiced and expressed to the gathered group. Not only were we bringing personal stories, we were being influenced by those of our team members. We were externalizing our personal and individual story.

One person had a positive experience of contemporary worship in his previous church and wanted to duplicate that experience in the new church. Another was coming from a mono-ethnic church setting and did not want to repeat the cultural experience of his previous church. Another team member had been at a church that had a strong social justice program and wanted the new church to have that same value, while another individual felt that a social justice component was absent in her previous church and wanted to be part of a church that would address social as well as individual issues. Whether through positive or negative experiences, individual members were externalizing their experiences to the rest of the group and shaping the direction of the church plant.

The second step is the process of objectification and institutionalization.

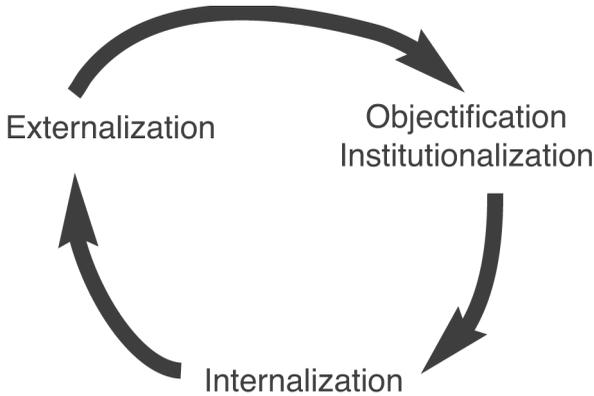
Once individuals have externalized their personal values, these externalized individual values form a collective. This collective value system becomes objectified and institutionalized as the system takes on a life of its own. The system that has been created is now independent of the individuals who created it in the first place. This institutionalization is reflected in the biblical language of powers and principalities. The institution will, in all likelihood, outlive the individuals who created it. And while the institution will bear the marks and imprint of the original ones who helped found it, the institution has the capacity to move beyond the limitations and boundaries of their externalized values.

A few years into a church plant, the founding pastor becomes aware that the church has taken on a life of its own. In fact, many of the original members may have moved on. And while the church plant still bears the strong imprint of the individuals who founded it, the church should no longer be dependent on those individuals for survival. The church has become an entity that extends beyond the original church-planting team. In fact, the institution of the church has begun to move toward the third stage of the creation of a social system.

The third step is the process of internalization. Not only has the institution taken on a life of its own, it now has the capacity to affect and shape those who are within that system. The created system can internalize a new set of values on those who are a part of that system. In our church-planting illustration, we see newcomers to the church being influenced and shaped by the system and institution of the church. Not only has the church ethos taken on a life of its own, it now has the capacity to internalize values for those in the system. A newcomer to the church will be shaped by its value system, even if the church value system does not correspond directly to the collective value system of the individuals who founded the church in the first place.

The three steps do not operate along a straight line. Instead, they operate as a circle that continues its impact and transformation through multiple iterations.

The Cycle of Social Construction of Reality



The system that operates to internalize the value system of its newcomers will also be influenced by the individuals who externalize their value system to the institution they are now a part of. Systems operate on multiple levels of influencing and being influenced by the individuals within the system.

In the same way, culture operates on all three levels of social structural development. Culture is shaped by individuals within the system. That is why defining a culture can be tricky—individuals continue to externalize their value system into the culture. At the same time the culture shapes the individuals within that culture. This system becomes even more complicated when individuals operate in multiple cultural systems.

Culture, in short, operates on the level of both the individual and the social system. As anthropologist Clifford Geertz explains, “What this means is that culture, rather than being added on, so to speak, to a

finished or virtually finished animal, was ingredient, and centrally ingredient, in the production of that animal itself. . . . We are, in sum, incomplete or unfinished animals who complete or finish ourselves through culture.”²⁹ Geertz’s main point is that culture operates on two levels (the individual and the corporate) and also has the capacity to have an ongoing and continuing impact on the individual. The social construct of culture must be considered when we strive after cultural intelligence.

When we attempt to understand and define culture—on the anthropological, sociological, and theological levels—there needs to be an incorporation of both its individual and corporate aspects. When we strive for cultural intelligence, we need a biblical understanding of culture that arises from our high view of Scripture. Scriptures testify to a corporate reality. The work of God’s redemption, therefore, must consider how social and cultural transformation, as well as individual transformation, may occur.

So what is culture? It is a human attempt to understand the world around us. It is the programming that shapes who we are and who we are becoming. It is a social system that is shaped by the individual and that also has the capacity to shape the individual. But it is also the presence of God, the image of God, the mission of God found in the human spirit, soul, and social system.