

Anthropological Considerations of Acts 17

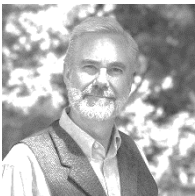
Jack M. Schultz

“From one man he made every nation of men that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. ‘For in him we live and move and have our being.’ As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his children.’ Therefore since we are God’s children, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by man’s design and skill. In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent” (Acts 17:26–30, NIV).

Introduction

The following is an explication of the significance of a portion of Acts 17 *qua* a Lutheran Christian informed by my vocation of anthropologist. This investigation considers the implications of the easily overlooked assertion that St. Paul makes to the people of Athens: God determines the times and places for people to live.

A bit of my personal background: I am a lifelong LCMS member. I am rostered as a Director of Christian Education in our synod. I am also a practicing anthropologist. I am in my twenty-sixth year as Professor of Anthropology at Concordia, Irvine. I have been involved in training our full-time and volunteer missionaries on and off since 1997. I have taught courses on the intersection of missions, ministry, and culture at both of our seminaries. As such, I am deeply committed to Christ’s mission and the mission efforts of our church. As an anthropologist, my vocation is to investigate the human, social, and material forces which organize our experiences. As a Christian who is training missionaries, I attempt to apply those anthropological insights into our mission strategies. It is that intersection of Biblical truth and anthropological insight which gives rise to this article. My goal is to provide additional factors for those in



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mission to consider as they develop strategies to proclaim the Gospel of Christ throughout the whole world.

Anthropologists explore human cultures. We go off to exotic locations and spend time in communities making observations and developing theories. We look at the presence and absence of local resources, and then conclude how those resources affect the lifeway of the group. We describe how the environmental, material, and social resources constrain the group and shape their basic subsistence, settlement patterns, kinship organizations, political organizations, and how the absence of resources forces interactions with their neighbors through trading or raiding, and so on. These material constraints are viewed as critical for understanding the culture being observed. When explaining how and where various ethnic peoples live, anthropologists recount a variety of environmental, historical, and social factors that result in the placement of people around the globe.

The Acts 17 text above provides an intriguing additional factor. It states that God himself determined or appointed the times and exact places for the “ethnics” (ἔθνος, *ethnos*; peoples, nations, races) to live. Therefore, the situation of human beings in specific times and places is not simply the result of ordered socio-cultural processes, nor the result of random accidents; rather, it is the determination of God. As an anthropologist I am particularly sensitive to the implications of that assertion in a way that non-specialists are not. The text¹ expresses quite clearly that the ethnics (*ethnos*) were appointed by God to their place and time (God “*determined* the times set for them and the *exact* places where they should live”). God places people within a context. As an anthropologist, I recognize that “time and place,” a context, necessarily involves *culture*. The sense of this text should be understood as “God places people in their respective cultures.”

What is even more remarkable about this text is the stated *purpose* for which God so determined the placement of the ethnics—that they should “seek God and perhaps reach out and find him.”² The text might then be glossed as “God places people in their respective cultures so that by way of them they should seek God.”

Consider the consequences to such an understanding: God determined the cultural milieus for all the ethnics, whether they are in communist China, Aztec Mesoamerica, Buddhist Japan, Muslim Iran, or Lakota, Pawnee, Seminole and Inuit native America, or Lutheran America, to “search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us.” God has made us, *all of us*, to seek Him—it is our very nature. It seems then, that through, by way of, our placement in time and space (our unique cultural context), determined by God, that we should seek Him.

Paul Addresses the Areopagus

In chapter 17 of Acts we read that Paul had just left Berea for Athens, and while he was waiting for Silas and Timothy to arrive “his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols” (Acts 17:16). He responded by “reasoning” with the Jews and devout persons in the synagogue and those who happened to be in the

marketplace. As a result of his preaching, he was invited to Areopagus to present his “new teaching” to the Athenians and foreigners. He begins his address with this observation: “Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious”: an observation that affirmed their orientation. But then he immediately asserts a correction—what you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. Paul posits this unknown god as θεός (*theos*; a god, God, the Creator), not made or served by human hands, but instead the One who gives to mankind “life and breath and everything.” It is then that the remarkable passage occurs: “he . . . determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling places” of “every nation of mankind” (Acts 17:26). This phrase, allotted periods and boundaries, compels me as an anthropologist because time and place indicates culture.

The Role of Culture

Even an elementary understanding of anthropology reveals that time and place heavily influence the life of groups and individuals within those groups. Time and place are not neutral. They are not blank canvases that freely acting individuals can write their lives upon. Social and cultural forces allow and constrain, even when we are unaware of those forces. God “determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us.”

Each of us, as socialized members of a culture and society, were participants in that culture and society long before we were aware of it. As we acquired language, food preferences, manners, and a sense of humor, we also acquired a religious orientation—in other words, we acquired a *how* to seek God.³ Our cultural context provides practices, rituals, morals, and sentiments by which we “seek God and perhaps find him.” We use the channels established by our cultural context. By the time we became aware of the channels, we were already firmly held in their grasp. These are forces that are implicit in a “time and place.” We had learned *how* to seek God long before we even knew we were seeking God.

None of us is exempted from these forces of culture—they are impossible to escape. We cannot have thoughts without language (and a particular language at that), we cannot live without food; we cannot interact without some rules of governance. Indeed, human beings require culture. We are not born with instincts which order our interactions with the environment; we need to be taught how to interact with each other and our surroundings simply to stay alive. Our identities, values, ideals, aesthetics, tastes are all contingent upon our cultural context. We may not care for our culture; we can attempt to reject it, and we can try to shape and change it, but we will simply end up with another, equally constraining culture. We cannot be “cultureless” and, as asserted in Acts 17:26, God placed us within *specific cultures* that we should seek Him.

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As a Christian, understanding this text is truth, and as an anthropologist, sensitive to the importance of context, it seems clear to me that through, or by way of, our culture (i.e., our time and place) that God has determined we should seek Him. I’m not certain that we Christians have appreciated the importance of that assertion; for if we did, we would necessarily approach religious diversity differently.

Human Efforts to Find God are Inadequate but Valuable

Now with all this background in place, allow me to state the thesis as plainly as I can: *God places people within a cultural context which includes a religious tradition, whether it be Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Catholicism, or Lutheranism, so that they might seek Him.* It is not an accident of birth that we are born into a cultural-religious context. It is God’s doing, so that we might seek Him.⁴ Apparently this “ethnically relative religious seeking” is important to God despite the fact that it is clearly incomplete. As fallen creatures, we are prone to idolatry. Our religious tendencies are often misled and corrupted. We are self-serving and are reluctant to recognize our creature-to-Creator relationship. Yet, we long to be Home, “to seek God,” to return to the One who created us.

It is necessary to understand that this determination of “the times” and “exact places” does not mean God caused some to be Muslim, or Buddhist, or Catholic, Traditional Native, or Lutheran; rather, God places us in contexts in which we are to seek Him. Indeed, I would maintain that the categories of religion we are comfortable with (Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist, etc.) are not meaningful categories to God. God sees individuals, unique and distinctive, and desires a unique and distinctive relationship

with each. God creates individuals with a longing to return to Him, but now with a fallen nature that hinders, obfuscates, and misleads. Such is the human condition.

“God did this *so that men would seek him.*” *They* seek God—that means that this is a human endeavor—man seeking God. So as they seek (ψηλαφάω, reach out for, grope for, to be grasped after) they may perhaps “snatch handfuls” of God—partial, incomplete, inaccurate, to be sure—yet this groping is apparently valuable to God—that is why He determined their times and places. They were to “seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him”—until that time when God would reveal His fullness to each person through the cross and resurrection of the God-man Jesus Christ. It is as if we are to learn a way to seek God—a set of laws, or ceremony, or ritual—only to find it deficient. I am reminded of what Paul wrote about the Israelites, which might be said of any who participate in their cultural ways of “seeking God:”

For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. For, being ignorant of the righteousness of God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God’s righteousness. For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes. (Romans 10:2–4)

To the Christians in Rome Paul wrote, “for what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made” (Rom 1:19–20); and in our text, “being then God’s offspring” (Acts 17:29), it should not be surprising that people would respond to this manifestation of God through a religious response. And immediately Paul recognizes the limitations of that response. He continues to the Romans, “for although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things” (Rom 1:21–23). We have a divinely assigned longing for God, but our quests to know Him are inadequate until He reveals Himself in Christ Jesus.

God Reveals Himself in Christ Jesus

Our text goes on: “In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent” (Acts 17:30, NIV). Within the context of the Acts narrative of Athens reviewed earlier, the ignorance referred to is idolatry: religiousness misdirected toward an unknown god. The directive to repentance in this text does not likely mean a tear-filled confession of regrettable acts; rather, the more literal understanding of the Greek word μετανοεῖν, connoting a necessary “change of mind or attitude,” is more appropriate here. In this context then, the repentance required may be viewed as the individual’s recognition of her or his condition—that there is something more to this “groping after God.” That which their efforts to find God held in promise, gives way to the realization that God in Christ is seeking them!

As one theologian observed, repentance is “pressing on to lay hold upon that for which Christ laid hold upon you.”⁵ It is not the search that needs to be repented of, but the ignorance—remember that God *placed* them in their positions that they might seek Him—they were acting in their ignorance in their blind groping after God, but now He has revealed himself to them in the cross of Christ. In the person of Christ, we recognize that our search is over and that what we searched for has found us. Our lives are now changed. We go forward “speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ” (Eph 4:15), learning our place in His work and will.

Why? “Because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed” (Acts 17:31). All will be discerned, properly divided—“this, not this”—in and by Christ.

It is not inaccurate to describe that the difference between the ethnic groper and the follower of Jesus is the nature of our relationship to God—the former seeks, the latter is sought. This is fundamentally the message of the Gospel, and this is what we are commanded to proclaim. We proclaim the way, Christ. We know the way because God has revealed Himself to us in Christ. What we through our “seeking” could only occasionally touch, He has revealed fully. God desires relationship with us, and the only way of meaningful relationship with Him is the way that He has ordained—through His Christ. In the person of Christ, we recognize that our search is over because God has found us. That which was longed for has been revealed to us in the good news that God reclaims and redeems us in Christ.

The culturally determined religion (the context in which one is found) proves itself inadequate and must lead us to Christ, the Truth, the One by, through, and for which all things are made. These religious sentiments are to awaken in us that which is deepest, most foundational to our being: that we are created to be in relationship with the Creator and that He created us to know and follow Him. These religious *gropings* remind us that we are not what we should be; that we cannot with even our purest, most earnest efforts be that which we were created to be and do that which we were created to perform. It is appropriate to understand these religious directives just as Lutherans have understood the first two functions of the Law: as a curb to keep order, as a mirror to show us our sin and to demonstrate that we cannot fulfill its requirements. But now, “a righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law . . . the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe” (Rom 3:21–22).

Implications of Paul’s Assertion

My goal has been to apply anthropological insight to our understanding of the text to provide a fuller appreciation of the significance and implications of Paul’s assertion that God Himself determined or appointed the times and exact places for the peoples to live. As an anthropologist, I recognize that “time and place” necessarily indicates *culture*. The sense of this text should be understood, therefore, as “God places people

in their respective cultures so that by way of them they should seek God.” This seems an indisputable assertion.

On this base I am going to build. While not explicitly found in the text, I will draw implications and state directives which flow out of the text and my own experiences and ruminations regarding cross-cultural/cross-religious encounters. These observations, to me, flow inevitably from Paul’s statement. I understand that the reader might not agree, and that would be the locus of continued dialogue. At this time in the life of American Christianity where our relevance is continuously being challenged, such dialogue is imperative. If I have successfully established the force of time and place in shaping a person’s “seeking for God,” then several significant implications follow:

We need to acknowledge, not denigrate, religious diversity as determined by God.

Rather than viewing cultural diversity as merely a consequence of sin or the fall,⁶ it appears to be a means that God has prepared for us to “seek Him.” And rather than denigrating non-Christian religions simply as false we should rather view them as incomplete—that is, these cultural expressions were appointed for a season—and *that* season passes when the fullness of God in Christ is revealed to individuals.⁷ The revealed Word transcends the directives of culture. Then the ethnic’s pursuit of God gives way to God’s pursuit of them in Christ. Perhaps we should view their “groping after God” as a tutoring,⁸ a necessary step which God himself determined. Therefore, we must not simply dismiss these humanly constructed religions as false. Of course, humanly constructed religions are limited, misleading, inadequate, and if left to themselves ultimately idolatrous; however, it seems this *seeking* of God is what God wills.

We also are cultured and we need to repent our ignorance.

“The nations” includes all people, even us. We are also ethnics: Lutheran; American. God has determined the time and place set for us. We have been living under the rule of our own culture—blind to its machinations and idiosyncrasies. We too, like people everywhere, have been taught to believe that our way is universal, honorable, and just “regular,” not cultural. We often confuse culture for reality, the particular for a universal, a temporal for an eternal. “All people everywhere” are commanded to repent of ignorance. That includes us who were placed in a nominally “Christian” culture. For we also are guilty of failing to “clearly perceive” God in the “things that have been made,” and although we know God, we do not honor Him as God. Consider that many of the Israelites, to whom “the oracles of God” were entrusted, failed to recognize the Christ when He stood before them. As Paul continued to the Romans,

Therefore you have no excuse, O man, every one of you who judges. For in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, practice the very same things. We know that the judgment of God rightly falls on those who practice such things. Do you suppose, O man—you

who judge those who practice such things and yet do them yourself—that you will escape the judgment of God? Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God’s kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?” (Romans 2:1–4)

Perhaps we might admit that religious knowledge, like all other knowledge, may develop through time and that even religious knowledge builds upon knowledge. Did the infinite God reveal different aspects of the truth to different peoples? Have others, placed within their cultures by God that they might seek Him, anything to teach us about the truth of the infinite God? Is *Sehnsucht* felt only by Westerners? Do only Lutherans feel the hammer of the law and a longing for grace? What might a Chinese philosopher contribute to an understanding of righteousness, or a Navajo shaman to an understanding of grace? Do we know all that can be known about the infinite God already? “He did this [placed people in specific religious traditions] so that men might seek him, though he is not far from any of us.”

Even those of us who are known by the living Christ, who seek faithfully to live out a relationship with the living God do not have a “once-and-for-all” understanding of the Creator’s infinitude. We who have been found are not at the end but the beginning of our journey with our Lord. To admit that our knowledge is partial, incomplete, contextual, does not follow that it is in error. Are we not allowed to build upon the truth we inherited? Have we concluded that “all people everywhere” does not include us, that we have no ignorance to repent of? I am mindful here of Luther’s Thesis 1 of 95: “When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, ‘Repent,’ (Matthew 4:17), he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.”

To admit that our knowledge is partial, incomplete, contextual, does not follow that it is in error. Are we not allowed to build upon the truth we inherited?

Might we be guilty of having fossilized a partial understanding of God and fighting valiantly to preserve (protect) it. God is an infinite, living being, a person, interested and active. It is not doctrines that we are to know, it is not a holy book that we are to love, it is not a franchise that we are to patronize—rather, we are to know a living person, Christ Jesus, who promises His continued presence. He is not an elaborate scheme of interrelated propositions and if/then statements. He is not a system of carefully parsed and placed words to be recited and embraced, but a person, Christ, to be known and followed.

What has happened to our prophetic imagination? The Word of God is a person, alive and active—a vital force who reveals himself ever-anew. The Reformation did not get it right once for all. We must again be open to the urgings of the Spirit to expose and purify the Church’s sins and ignorance. We have reached the point in our nation when we are no longer defaulted to nominally Christian explanations and assumptions. We are beginning to feel the antagonisms (well-earned in many cases) of people who

are dissatisfied with narrow partisans speaking for God and tired accounts of “what the Bible says.”

Perhaps our seminaries might be thought of more like laboratories that discover rather than museums that preserve. I realize I am causing a rising discomfort, as even the suggestion of critical inquiry which might result in new insight has been chained to the specters of faithlessness, heterodoxy, and heresy. We have bound any change of understanding to the slippery slope of apostasy. Fossilization is understood as faithfulness.⁹ But certainly we, direct heirs of the Reformation, must recognize that human institutions are prone to corruption and must be ongoingly subjected to the judgment of God.

People will respond to the Gospel of Jesus Christ as cultured persons.

Just as culture is critical in the formation of the non-Christian religious seeking, it is equally critical in the formation of an authentic response of faith. We who have been called to faith respond in worship, devotion, service, and righteous living. Each of these areas is lived out in a context of culture and that culture influences their expression.¹⁰

Christians' communications with the nations must use the ethnic n's "seeking of God" as the starting place from which to communicate the fullness of God. One can see in this text how Paul did that very thing. Notice that Paul's approach described in the text does not begin with a condemnation of their efforts nor a denigration of their "seeking" as simply false. Rather, he frames it as incomplete: "Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you" (Acts 17:23, NIV). Paul begins with statements with which his hearers will agree: "As some of your own poets have said . . ." (Acts 17:28–29, NIV). They have already been engaged in a search for truth, and that search needs to be directed. Paul goes about providing that direction here.¹¹

What is the religious understanding with which the convert begins? This needs to be built upon, not denied and abolished. What, for example, is the good news for a Muslim? What is the good news for a Navajo who is much more sensitive to feelings of shame than guilt? How does a former Muslim live out righteousness? What are the sins that vex her? How is the neighbor loved? What does the joyful noise sound like? What is modest attire and non-coarse speech for the Indonesian young adult? What does "worshipping in spirit and truth" look like for a community with no tradition of corporate worship? And who should answer these questions? Certainly not the cultural outsider who has parochial ideas as to what the Christian must look like.

Perhaps the Arab convert will still wear a hijab, kneel toward the "holy city," but pray five times a day to Jesus. Or, perhaps the Native American convert will still greet the four directions each morning with a sacred pipe filled with tobacco offering the "visible breath" of a smoke-infused (incensed) prayer to the "one who holds all things together." Might not a sweat lodge ritual be a "daily reminder of our baptism," or a smudging of white sage accompany a confession of sins?

When a person "comes to the knowledge of the truth," she or he will do it in a cultured way. We don't utterly cease being who we are after conversion; we become more, we become our true being. Our Lord encounters us as cultured people, within a

cultural context. It would be heavy-handed to require the new Christian to abandon their culture. We shouldn't expect her to abandon her language, her dress, food preferences, and celebrations. We should expect that she understand these differently, just as Western Christians have made use of non-Christian-but-not-anti-Christian practices such as Christmas trees and Yule logs in the homes and sanctuaries, egg and rabbit symbolism at Easter (and even this common name for the celebration of the resurrection!), albs, voter's meetings and Robert's Rules of Order, pews, pulpits, church shopping, and marketing strategies.

We should not be surprised that Christian churches take on local color, for Christians respond to the universal Gospel in culturally meaningful ways.¹² Perhaps the converts won't join our churches and sing our songs. Perhaps they'll start their own seminaries and publish their own materials. We must trust that same Spirit who guides us will guide them in the truth. They might not "look Christian" or "act Christian," but might that be because we have in mind a very narrow, culturally specific image of what being Christian must be? Recognizing the inseparability of doctrine and praxis, of culture and faith, we must reject the assumption that they must look, sound, and act like us.

Converts should not be expected to change their language, dress, food preferences, that is, those *adiaphoric* features of culture. Historically, Christian converts were required to abandon all the markings of their pagan past, many of which might be best understood as their cultural accouterments, and to take up Christian markers, many of which might be best understood as the missionaries' cultural accouterments. Historical examples include hair braids, dancing, prayers accompanied with the incense of burning tobacco, polygamy, surf boarding, exposed female breasts, low-stakes gambling, peyote, uncooked meat, native languages, praying prostrate, stickball, and fermented beverages. And even if any of these things might be demonstrated as exclusively "religious" it does not follow that they could not be "converted" to Christian meanings in the same way that trees, eggs, organs, albs, democratic principles, and capitalism have been reinterpreted for Christian use.

I fear this all might be misunderstood as Universalism. It is not. Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life, and no one comes to the Father but by Him. He and the Father are one. Rather than judging that "gropers" are lost, we should be declaring that they "who were once far off"¹³ have almost arrived, and the Master of the House is on His way to welcome. Rather than us believing that *we* are Home already, perhaps these others might have something to offer us along the way.

We need to reframe the missionary encounter.

Our God-given seeking after God is incomplete. God must reveal Himself to us if we are to know Him as He is. "All people everywhere need to repent," that includes us. We too are cultured and parochial, bound by our cultures; we too lack a full understanding of the infinite God. When we knowingly settle for less than the true object of our groping, we are committing idolatry. It is not an exaggeration to state that the seekers do indeed commit idolatry when the *search for God* ends and a

caricature of God is codified, institutionalized, and venerated—that is, when it becomes merely a *religion*. Here, even followers of Jesus must face a judgment of God: Have we settled for a description of God rather than a bond with the living God? Are we so naïve to believe that we have a complete, perfect understanding of God? We are at risk of settling for a depiction of God rather than being known by God.¹⁴ We would also do well to consider that perhaps the ethnics may have clarity in some areas that we may see only dimly, just as we may have some clarity in areas where they see dimly. We proclaim Christ, the son of God, crucified, died and resurrected. That is always what we bring to the conversation. He is the “exact imprint of [God’s] nature” (Heb 1:3). He is the One whom they have unknowingly sought all their lives.

We must admit that our churches aren’t only about Him. They are also human institutions fraught with human limitations and agendas. We can enter a missionary encounter knowing that we have ignorance to be repented of, and the judgment of God to be endured even while we boldly proclaim Christ crucified as the only way to the Father.

Perhaps evangelism must be reframed as a dialogue in which both parties have something to contribute. What do you know, for example, about Islam that isn’t through a Western-Christian lens? Have you actually developed a relationship with a Muslim who earnestly seeks the will of God, to learn his deeply held, honestly sought and acquired convictions? We are by default obtuse to those views differ from our own. While we could seek to understand others, which is the only way we could hope to be understood in return, we are satisfied with presenting our own representations of truth. But without having a basic ground of respect and value, our representations inevitably appear to them as provincial.

Perhaps we may have to learn to be uncomfortable with the difficult questions and allow them to show our “ignorance” and remind us that we need to repent. The missionary’s task is to be a witness, not a converter. We speak of what we know; we proclaim what we have experienced: Christ, God’s anointed, crucified, risen, and eternally present. That is our calling. It is the Spirit’s task to bring faith, repentance, and sanctification.

Conclusions

This investigation of Acts 17 is informed by my vocation as an anthropologist. For the anthropologist, the impact of culture is difficult to overestimate. It shapes, directs, hides, limits, enables, and completes. Throughout this exploration, I have taken the phrase “God determined the times . . . and exact places . . . so that men would seek him” to mean that God values cultural, and therefore religious, diversity. As an anthropologist, I am focused on the often-hidden power of culture. My primary task is to make explicit these usually tacit forces. It has been my goal in this paper to remind readers of the importance of these cultural factors in shaping our response to the Gospel of Christ. Theology without acknowledging culture’s role in shaping understanding, even understanding the Word of God, becomes parochial and ethnocentric. An emphasis on cultural relativities, without the grounding in the Word of God, becomes a subjective wasteland where any claim to truth is as valid as another.

I have to speak from my position. I proclaim out of my vocation. I am not a theologian. And no doubt, error might be argued with my specific implications, but Paul's main assertion cannot be dismissed: "God determined the times . . . and exact places," and with that the stated purpose that "God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him" (Acts 17:26, 27, NIV). What else are we to make of it but that cultural context and therefore religious diversity is valuable to God? Although this diversity is an essential starting point, it must give way to the fulness of God revealed in Christ.

When the Word is proclaimed, the Spirit is active. The same Spirit which lovingly brought us to faith is also at work in the lives of the ethnics. In the same way that the others have been bound by cultural limitations regarding the infinite God, we too have ignorance that we must repent of. The Spirit of God revealed Himself to us with cultural contexts, in a language we understand, using metaphors, images, and concepts that we embrace (all of which are products of culture). We "see in a mirror dimly . . . I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known" (1 Cor 13:13), but that is not yet. Certainly we must recognize that God's Spirit is active among us still, that we need to "grow up into to salvation" (1 Pet 2:2), that our human institutions need correcting. That revelation creates repentance, an errant heart in need of return to its maker to become all that it was created to be. That revelation is of the person Jesus Christ, not a humanly generated religious understanding. We must proceed with humility, trusting that God has been at work among these others. We must proceed with a desire to understand these others in a spirit of cooperation rather than contention, and above all, continue with a clear proclamation of the Good News of Christ Jesus in a way that the other can comprehend.

Endnotes

¹ See also Deut 32:8a (NIV): "When the Most High gave the nations their inheritance, when he divided all mankind, he set up boundaries for the peoples." Interestingly, and more in support of my thesis, the earliest Hebrew text of this verse reads, "When the Most High apportioned the nations, when he divided humankind, he fixed the boundaries of the people according to the number of the gods." Quoted in Ben Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 527.

² Others have commented on this text: F.F. Bruce asks, "What was God's purpose in thus arranging time and place so providentially for men and women's well-being? 'It was', Paul says, 'in order that they might seek God and find him.'" *The Book of Acts*, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988), 338. Ben Witherington concludes that "Humankind was not created to inhabit various places and so to seek God since they were scattered across the face of the earth, as if looking for some sort of divine unifying factor. To the contrary, by nature, not by locale or placement, human beings were made to be in fellowship with God from the beginning of creation." *The Acts of the Apostles*, 528.

³ Or gods, or spirits, or ancestors, or undefined forces which are believed to affect human beings as the particular cultural context dictates.

⁴ The text asserts an astonishing proposition—God determining times and exact locations—which raises significant and vexing questions: Is it referring to the specific location of all people, in all times, as being determined by God (and does that include, for example, one’s move to another state or another nation as part of this determination? Are *relocations* included? What about forced relocations or migrations)? And what does “exact places” mean? Is it to be understood at the level of continents, nations, towns, or houses? How does “God determined” align with free will? Or might this divine placement refer to some more general categories such as race or ethnicity? That is, perhaps these people groups were at some time in the past placed, a God-given start, but that later by way of a variety of social and historical (not to mention psychological) factors their descendants, acting on their own free will, freely moved about. But even this is problematic. “Groups” are not static. Members of groups die, children are born, and new members marry in. Indeed, the concept of “race” masks the fluid nature of groups and implies for many a kind of “natural” division and classification that has only recently become mixed. But social history and genetic analysis convincingly demonstrates that groups are continually fissioning and fusing. There is not nor has there ever been “pure races.” Certainly there were not five sets of Adam and Eve, each with a different “pure race.” All of the human diversity over-generalized and codified into five races comes out of only two people. It must be stressed that “God’s determination” here does not mean that He machinates all human movement (i.e., determined by God’s direct action and intervention). For that would be exceedingly problematic when one considers the vast forced and voluntary displacement of people groups and even our current (but constantly changing) cultural/political boundaries, but it certainly must mean that cultural diversity is not simply a result of sin or the fall.

⁵ George MacDonald, *George MacDonald in the Pulpit: A Compilation of Spoken Sermons from 1871–1901*, comp. David Edwards and J. Joseph Flynn (Whitehorn, CA: Johannesen Printing and Publishing, 1996), 309.

⁶ I often hear it argued that cultural diversity is a result of the dispersion of peoples as their “language was confused” at the Tower of Babel (Gen 11:1–9) and therefore an aspect of the fallen world. It might well be argued that the “confusion of tongues” was as much about forcing people “to fill the whole earth” as it was about punishing for pride.

⁷ This “season” can be viewed in universal terms—“But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son” (Gal 4:4a, NIV), inaugurating the Christian era—but may also be viewed as a season in the life of an individual—that time before a person comes to faith. In other words, “in the past” may be referring not just to the period before Christ incarnate, but to a specific individual’s past; that time before “Christ for me.”

⁸ The ethnics also have a tutor in a way analogous to the pre-Christian Jews and the Law. “But before faith came, we were kept in custody under the law, being shut up to the faith which was later to be revealed. Therefore the Law has become our tutor to lead us to Christ, that we may be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor” (Gal 3:23–25, NASB). It may be fruitful to note that the Greek word translated here as “law” is νόμος, or *nomos*. This word “*nomos*” is also used by social scientists to refer to the worldview an individual shares with his compatriots, and is contrasted with “anomy,” that feeling of despair accompanying “worldlessness” (when one’s worldview has been dismantled or threatened). For example, see Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967). So perhaps it is not too much of a stretch to read that culture (or, that part of culture identified as worldview, *nomos*) can also be seen as a tutor by which we may be “led to Christ, that we may be justified by faith.” Clement of Alexandria similarly asserted that philosophy was the tutor for Greeks, “to bring the Hellenistic mind to Christ.” Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds.,

The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of The Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1956), 2:305.

⁹ “For the Word of God is living and active” (Heb 12:4). There are two kinds of energy that might be used to analogize and contrast the views of nature of the Word of God. 1. There is fossilized energy: petroleum and coal. There is a finite amount that, to be useful, is discovered and captured. 2. Organic energy is contained in living, or recently living things: plants and animals. This kind of energy is in temporary containers or forms. A plant, full of carbohydrates resulting from photosynthesizing sunlight and soil energy, is consumed by an animal, and the organic energy is transferred to the animal. Organic energy is not in a fixed form but is emergent. It is expressed contextually. When the power of the Word is viewed as fixed and fossilized it necessarily implies that we need to recover the pure form, ancient, limited, finite, precious. When viewing it as organic we necessarily understand it to be manifested in varying forms, within particular environments, adapted to changing contexts. Thinking of the Word of God as more like organic energy allows us to see it and Jesus, the Word of God made flesh, as a living being. Fossils were once alive but are no more. Organic energy is an objective, not subjective, thing. It is the enlivening element. It is life and spirit, passed on from one being to another. It required lineage, interaction, and relationship. It is not stored indefinitely. It has a shelf life, a lifespan. It needs to be passed on, not stored and protected. Each generation will be found manifesting a slightly different form.

¹⁰ When one approaches cultural expressions of the Christian faith it soon becomes apparent that our traditional theological categories may not be robust enough to explain and settle. The determination of *adiaphora* as an abstraction and theoretical principle is readily grasped. However, the determination of what *is* and what *is not adiaphora* is much more troublesome, and the determination of it is highly contextual. Rather than an explanation, these categories are a description of an inherent tension that still needs explanation and resolution. For example, consider the practice of polygamy as practiced in many tribal communities. Our own missionaries are divided on this issue. Even if we invoke a Two Kingdoms approach we might not fare much better, as the Christian lives in both Kingdoms simultaneously. Our faith lives, as responses to the Gospel, are embodied in a particular place and time, subject to preference, interpretation and even political leanings. Whatever actions we take presuppose and privilege a particular set of proposals and assumptions while at the same time precluding others.

¹¹ It is difficult to overemphasize the power of culture in the shaping of a life. The cultural context provides the resources for us to live our lives. These cultural resources are both material and imaginative, and it is from resources that individuals negotiate their identities (out of the myriad of possible identities). Resources can enable and also limit. One can readily see this with material resources (and lack thereof), but this is just as true for the imaginative resources. For example, cultures produce and reinforce narratives of meaning which create a shared imaginative space of what is, what may be, and what will be, and what cannot be. The imaginative space, often hidden from view, is every bit as real as a material space. And just as one might have to clear obstacles in a material space, one might also have to negotiate obstacles in the imaginative space. I believe this is, at least in part, what Paul was doing here.

¹² For a fuller treatment of these propositions and an example of how culture impacts a faith response, the reader is invited to review the author’s study of the Seminole Baptists of Oklahoma: Jack M. Schultz, *The Seminole Baptists of Oklahoma: Maintaining a Traditional Community* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999).

¹³ See Eph 2:12–16: “Remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope

and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who had made us both one and had broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility,” and Acts 2:39: “For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.”

¹⁴ Even Christians are idolaters when we are more dedicated to our denominational institutions than we are to the living God. We are reminded of how critical Jesus was of the established religious institution of His day.