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Dallas Apol
Dordt College

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Cultural Diversity

Dallas Apol
Professor of Foreign Language



Dallas Apol teaches German and Spanish at Dordt College. A graduate of Calvin College, he holds M.A. degrees from the University of Michigan and the Instituto de Lenguas Románicas in Durango, Mexico and received his Ph.D. from the University of Minnesota. He has been at Dordt College since 1965.

When we define culture as the human response to the surrounding creation of God, including relationships with other humans, we recognize culture as the integrated sum-total that makes up the life of a society. This broad concept of culture allows us to refer to Genesis 1:28, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it," as the cultural mandate.

It is clear that culture implies and involves diversity. People in different parts of the world live differently, react and interact differently, and think differently. This diversity, I believe, is normative.

Diversity is natural. It is a part of the created order. It is in keeping with the laws of creation that people in different parts of the world will be different. Our God is a God of infinite variety and his creation reflects this variety. Just as no two trees are exactly alike, as each sunset is different, as each wave of the ocean has a different form and force, so no persons or groups of people are alike. Cultural diversity is normative.

To explain my assertion that diversity is normative, I wish to look first at language. A basic fact of language is that human language is dynamic—it is constantly changing. We

understand this best when we go to a Shakespearian play, when we read from the King James version of the Bible, or when we hear that most of the "Thee's" and "Thou's" will be changed to "You" in the new *Psalter Hymnal*. Whenever groups of people speaking the same language do not keep in constant contact with each other, their languages change in different ways, forming dialects. These dialects become increasingly different until they finally form different languages. For example, English, German, and Dutch developed from a common language which historical linguists call Proto-Germanic. People in England and South Africa use a different brand of English than we do in the United States. There is a difference between the types of English used in Canada, in the East, the South and the Midwest. A fact of language is that the geographical separation of a language group inevitably leads to linguistic separation, as languages change into dialects and later, into different languages.

We can apply this fact of language to the events at the Tower of Babel for a different perspective on what happened there and why it happened. In Genesis 1:28, the cultural mandate, God commanded man and woman to fill the earth. However, in Genesis 11 we read that the whole earth used the same language and the same words. The people, in disobedience to God's command, said, "Let us build for ourselves a city and a tower...lest we be scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth." But listen to God's response to this human act: "The Lord said, 'Behold they are one people [one culture] and they all have the same language.... Come, let Us go down and there confuse their language that they may not understand one another's speech.' So the Lord scattered them abroad from there over the face of the whole earth." I believe that if the people of the world had scattered over the face of the earth as God commanded, the natural laws of language would have caused them to be speaking different languages in the course of time. When they did not scatter, God turned around the cause and effect, and the difference in their language caused them to scatter. Thus, instead of a difference in location causing different

languages, different languages caused the people to scatter.

After the incident of the tower of Babel, we have people of the same background speaking different languages. Because these people came from the same civilization, had lived in the same environment, and had shared the same world-view before the events at Babel, one would assume that they carried the same culture with them as they scattered. However, if culture is "the human response to the surrounding creation of God," as the people moved to different regions and as they interacted with different environmental conditions, their culture necessarily changed. Picture this in the area of housing: the life of a nomad necessitates different housing than a sedentary life; wood houses can be built only where there are trees; and housing in cold climates must be different from housing in warm climates. What is true of housing is true of all aspects of life. The way people obtain their food, their societal structure, their leisure time, whether they live in tribes, in villages, or in cities—all these are affected by the environment. Thus, when God decreed that people should spread over the face of the earth, the command carried with it the implication that the human race would form different cultures. Cultural diversity is normative.

Because God desires variety in culture, we must be careful not to assume that our particular culture or our brand of Christianity reflects God's will for all of the world. We live in a fallen world and our culture is also broken. Walsh and Middleton are correct when they write, "All cultural life consists of fallible instances of God's law.... No one instance of structure can stand as the true model, the right formulation."¹

We could give many examples of other cultures whose way of life appears to be at least as close to God's will for humankind as the North American culture. Only a few will be given. In the United States, we have a nuclear model of the family. If I were to ask people from the United States about the size of their family, they would answer in terms of father, mother, brothers, and sisters (or perhaps children). In

contrast to this, the question "How many are there in your family?" is not an appropriate question to ask Mexicans. It is inappropriate because they think of family in terms of parents, brothers and sisters, grandparents, uncles, and aunts, cousins, etc. "Family" to the Mexicans means the extended family.

For the past nine years I have lived for a part of each summer with a Mexican family. The "family" consists of a grandmother (now 96 years old) and two unmarried daughters. A married son and his wife and children live next door. A married daughter and her husband and children live in the following house. Already at this point I have lost count of how many are in

injunction of Genesis 2:24, "A man shall leave his father and his mother and shall cleave to his wife." But the extended family, as I see it in Mexico, conforms much more to the command, "Honor your father and your mother" and to passages such as Proverbs 17:6, "Grandchildren are the crown of old men, and the glory of sons is their fathers." Thus, each of these cultures conforms to differing parts of God's will for families.

Unfortunately, North Americans have a way of thinking that "the American way" is the only right way, or certainly the best way. The classic American tourist is the Ugly American. Very often I have heard Americans traveling in other

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the "family." The houses are connected by a common garden and the grandchildren move through the grandmother's house as if it were their own home, which it is. Cousins from other cities come and go continually. Each member of this family has the feeling of belonging—each considers this his or her home. In all this, the grandmother remains the head of the house. Children and grandchildren find her and greet her first as they enter the house, and show love, affection and reverence to her at all times.

Through this experience, I have gained a real appreciation for the concept of the extended family. The North American concept of the nuclear family seems to conform to the Biblical

countries complain about the way in which things are done in another culture. Last year there was a letter in "Dear Abby" that complained about how Europeans eat. The letter described how the fork is held in the left hand and the knife in the right, and included the line, "We tried to explain to them that it is much better to cut the food holding the knife in the right hand and then to lay down the knife and use the fork with the right hand, but they wouldn't listen to us." No, they wouldn't. And they shouldn't. Diversity is normative, also in social graces.

Our national government is hindered in its diplomacy by the policy that attempts to force

our culture and world-view on all the people of the world. Consider a recent issue regarding Native Americans. The U.S. government is forcing the Navajo and Hopi Indians in Arizona to move from the land their families have lived on for centuries. As an incentive for moving, the government has offered them \$65,000 homes to replace the shacks they have been living in, plus a \$5,000 bonus. Yet the Indians are demonstrating against this government policy and the officials of the Bureau of Indian Affairs generally don't understand why. It seems to be an offer no one could refuse. But let me quote from a few of the Indians who were interviewed: "To move away from the land means to disappear." Another person said, "The creator put us here and we are going to remain." Other Indians stated that they could never leave their "Mother Earth." Those who did accept the administration's offer often turned to alcoholism and faced emotional trauma. They stated the reason thus: "Our tie to the land was severed." It soon becomes obvious that we are dealing with a different world-view in regard to the land. This is a culture that the Bureau of Indian Affairs does not understand as it attempts to impose solutions upon the Indian.

This failure to understand differences in culture has also affected the witness of the church. Too often in the past our missionaries have confused Western culture with Christianity. Even the Wycliffe films in current distribution show the people wearing Western clothes and wrist watches after accepting Christ. While thinking about this subject I happened to hear on the radio that Hispanics in the U.S. are being driven from the church by the materialistic secularism of American churches. It has been my observation—and it is a distressing observation—that American Christians are more like American non-Christians than we are like Christians in other parts of the world.

To this point I have been stressing that it is okay for cultures to differ. However, the fall into sin affects all our actions and all cultures. Neither our culture nor any other culture represents God's perfect plan for the way we should live. As is pointed out by Walsh and

Middleton in *The Transforming Vision*, our Western culture worships a false god that exists, in what they call "the unholy trinity": scientism, technicism, and economism.²

All cultures are made up of sub-cultures. There is the Christian sub-culture, the yuppie sub-culture, the teen sub-culture, the sub-culture made up of drug and alcohol abusers, and many others. In every case the basic direction of a culture or sub-culture can be either God-glorifying or God-denying. Our task in the world is not only to accept the diversity of other cultures, but also to change the direction of our own culture. This demands a comprehensive Christian cultural vision. As a part of that vision we must recognize our culture as one of many cultures, each of which has some positive elements. We must admit that our culture is not God's final plan for his world. We must examine our culture, evaluate the elements of other cultures and sub-cultures, and "test the Spirits, to see whether they are from God" (I John 4:1).

ENDNOTES

¹Brian J. Walsh and J. Richard Middleton, *The Transforming Vision: Shaping a Christian World View*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1984), p. 179.

²Walsh and Middleton, p. 132.

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