

A Lutheran Examination Of Some Current Multicultural Presuppositions

John M. Brenner

Crosscultural work is not something new in the history of Christianity or even in the history of our own synod. We are, however, appropriately placing an increased emphasis on crosscultural mission work at the present time because our nation is experiencing a new wave of immigration. Some social scientists refer to a "browning" of America as they observe the changing racial make-up of our country. Neighborhoods in many communities are changing as a result of immigration and the mobility of various ethnic groups. Heterogeneous neighborhoods bring the challenge of crosscultural mission work to individuals who have not seriously confronted this challenge before.

At the same time a political ideology called *multiculturalism* has made its presence felt in our country. You have asked me to present a Lutheran examination of some current multicultural presuppositions. The task is not as simple as it sounds. Multiculturalism is not the same as what most of us would understand by crosscultural work and crosscultural sensitivity. "Multiculturalism" is a term that is new enough that it is not found in many recently published dictionaries. It can be defined as "the preservation of different cultures or cultural identities within a unified society, as a state or nation."¹ In practical terms it has become a political ideology that aims at changing American society. The purpose of this paper is not to argue for or against any of the political proposals of this ideology (e.g., government-sponsored bilingual education for immigrants) but to look at some of the presuppositions of the ideology.

Complicating the task is the fact that the term *culture* is difficult to define. For our purposes the term can be defined as "the totality of socially transmitted behavior patterns, arts, beliefs, institutions, and all other products of human work and thought."² Religion is a very important part of culture. It should be noted, however, that cultural differences are not the same as racial differences. Racial differences (skin color, etc.) are biologically inherited. Culture is learned and passed on from one generation to another by means of formal instruction, day to day actions and attitudes, and observed customs. People of different races may or may not have the same culture, just as people of the same race may or may not have the same culture.

Our definition raises other questions. One might wonder how many differences in behavior patterns and beliefs are necessary for two groups to be considered different cultures. In many ways Mormons are the most American of Americans, yet one could argue that Mormonism is a distinct culture with its own language and ways of thinking. Are Mormons an American sub-culture? What defines a sub-culture?

Another concept related to culture is *worldview*. Worldview can be defined as "1. the overall perspective from which one sees and interprets the world, and 2. a collection of beliefs about life and the universe held by an individual or a group."³ How is a person's worldview related to his culture? To most people in this world you and I would be indistinguishable culturally from most other Americans. Nevertheless our worldview is quite distinct from that of many, if not most, other Americans. For the purposes of this paper we will understand worldview as the beliefs which underlie culture. Christians see human beings, the world, and all that it contains from a perspective different from that of non-Christians.

Although our assignment involves a number of difficulties, we will try to proceed in a Lutheran manner. We will examine the topic of multiculturalism first of all by reminding ourselves of certain pertinent scriptural principles. Secondly, we will offer a brief overview of relevant aspects of history. Finally, we will look at some of the basic presuppositions of modern multiculturalism and examine them in the light of Scripture and history.

¹ *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language*. 2nd edition, unabridged (New York: Random House, 1987), p. 1263.

² *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*. 3rd edition (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1992), p. 654.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 2058.

Pertinent Principles of Scripture

1. *Every human being is a descendent of Adam and Eve and stands under God's condemnation because of Adam's sin. Every human being has inherited a sinful nature.*

According to Scripture not only is God the author of all life, but human beings all share a common ancestor. Every person who is alive today is descended from Adam. As Paul said to the Athenians, "He himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determines the times set for them and the exact places where they should live" (Ac 17:25-26). When Adam fell into sin, the entire human race fell with him because the entire race is descended from him and has inherited his fallen nature. As Jesus told Nicodemus, "Unless a man is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot see the kingdom of God. Flesh gives birth to flesh" (Jn 3:5-6). Paul reminds us, "Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned...the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men...through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners" (Ro 5:12,18,19).

2. *Every human being is a precious soul for whom Christ died. God wants all to be saved.*

In eternity God foresaw the human predicament and provided a way of salvation. God the Son became human to act as our Substitute. He placed himself under God's law and did all that the law required (Ga 4:4-5; Heb 4:15). He defeated the archenemy of all mankind in mortal combat by dying in our place (Heb 2:14-15). He suffered the punishment that sinful human beings deserve and atoned for the sins of all (Jn 1:29; 1 Jn 2:2). God has forgiven the whole world in Christ. "God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them" (2 Co 5:19). Jesus' resurrection is God's stamp of approval on his work of redemption. "He was delivered over to death for our sins and raised to life for our justification" (Ro 4:25).

God's grace and mercy are intended for all. Our God tells us, "As surely as I live," declares the Sovereign Lord, "I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their wicked ways and live" (Ez 33:11). The Bible assures us, "He is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but everyone to come to repentance" (2 Pt 3:9). "God our Savior...wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth" (1 Tm 2:4).

3. *Salvation comes only through faith in Jesus. The Holy Spirit works faith only through the means of grace, the gospel in Word and sacraments.*

Jesus died for the sins of the world. God has declared the world innocent because he declared Jesus guilty in our place. But human beings can receive the benefits of Christ's redemptive work only through faith in Jesus. "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved" (Ac 4:12). No one can be saved apart from the proclamation of the gospel in Word and sacraments. As Paul writes, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. How then can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent?...Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message and the message is heard through the word of Christ" (Ro 10:13-15, 17).

4. *God's Word must be proclaimed in language that is understandable to the hearers.*

Since faith comes from hearing the message, it follows that the message must be spoken in terms that the hearer can understand. Scripture does not teach an *immediate* (direct, apart from means) working of the

Holy Spirit. He works through the means of grace, the gospel in Word and sacrament. The means of grace are directed at our senses.

In his Corinthian correspondence St. Paul emphasizes the importance of proclaiming God's Word in intelligible speech. "Now, brothers, if I come to you and speak in tongues, what good will it be to you, unless I bring you some revelation or knowledge or prophecy or word of instruction? Even in the case of lifeless things that make sounds, such as the flute or harp, how will anyone know what tune is being played unless there is a distinction in the notes? Again, if the trumpet does not sound a clear call, who will get ready for battle? So it is with you. Unless you speak intelligible words with your tongue, how will anyone know what you are saying? You will be speaking into the air. Undoubtedly there are all sorts of languages in the world, yet none of them is without meaning. If then I do not grasp the meaning of what someone is saying, I am a foreigner to the speaker, and he is a foreigner to me" (1 Co 14:6-11).

St. Paul encourages us, "What you heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching (λόγῳ, words), with faith and love in Christ Jesus" (1 Tm 1:13). The words we choose are important because of the meaning they convey. The meaning of God's message must be clearly communicated. We will always want to be careful about the words we choose, not only so that we are understood, but also so that we cannot be misunderstood. It follows that Christian symbols and rites also have to be understandable to convey the meaning intended in their use.

5. *The gospel transcends culture and the proclamation of the gospel transforms culture.*

In the last weeks before Jesus ascended into heaven he commanded his followers, "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation" (Mk 16:15). He told them, "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I will be with you always to the very end of the age" (Mt 28:19,20). He declared, "Repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem" (Lk 24:47). Jesus' words demonstrate that the gospel transcends cultures and can be communicated across cultures.

St. John's vision shows the ultimate outcome of this crosscultural proclamation. He writes, "After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and holding palm branches in their hands" (Rev 7:9).

The gospel also transforms the cultures in which it is proclaimed. The pagan culture of the first century was perverse and antagonistic to Christianity. But since the gospel creates new life in sinful human beings, it also transforms the way they live and think and act. As Paul writes, "As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of the world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath. But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved" (Eph 2:1-5). Paul reminds the Corinthians that they had been part of the corrupt culture of their society. But a change had taken place. He writes, "And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God" (1 Co 6:11). Christians will have a different worldview and will be culturally different from unbelievers.

6. *Human beings know some things by nature. There is a natural knowledge of God and a natural knowledge of God's law. This natural knowledge is helpful to Christians in their mission efforts, but this natural knowledge cannot save anyone.*

The Bible declares, "The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God'" (Ps 14:1). Nature and creation testify to God's existence. "Since what may be known about God has been made plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse" (Ro 1:19,20; see also He 3:4). The human conscience also testifies that there is a higher power to whom we are accountable (Ro 2:13-15).

The conscience gives evidence that God has written his law on the human heart. Wherever you look in every era of history and every corner of the world you can see that people know that certain things are wrong. Paul says that this is evidence of the law written on the human heart. "Indeed when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required in the law, they are a law for themselves even though they do not have the law, since they show the requirements of the law written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them" (Ro 2:14,15).

When we proclaim the law, we will activate the human conscience. By writing his law on the human heart and giving everyone a conscience God has given us a natural point of contact with every human being.

But the natural knowledge of God and the natural knowledge of the law cannot save anyone. For although people know by nature that there is a God, they cannot know who the true God is. They have to be told. Although they know by nature that God is angry with sin, they cannot know that God has provided a Savior from their sins. They have to be told.

7. *The Bible is God's Word and is true, verbally inspired, inerrant, infallible, efficacious, and sufficient. The books of the Bible were not simply products of a human culture and experience, although they were originally written in and to people of a particular culture. The various books of the Bible were written because God moved men to write them, giving them not only the thoughts, but also moving them to choose the very words he wanted.*

St. Paul wrote to Timothy, "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness" (2 Tim 3:16). St. Peter tells us, "Prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Pt 1:21). God caused the writers of Scripture to record for us the message he intended and moved them to choose the very words he wanted.

Since all of Scripture is God's Word, it is true. It cannot err nor can what it says fail to come to pass. Jesus states in his great high priestly prayer, "Your word is truth" (Jn 17:17). Our Savior declares, "The Scripture cannot be broken" (Jn 10:35). The Bible is God's Word, and God does not and cannot lie (Ti 1:2, He 6:18, 2 Tm 2:13). Although the truth of Scripture appears foolish to human beings by nature, we know that "the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength" (1 Co 1:25). Because the Scriptures are God's absolute truth we subjugate our own thought to them. Paul writes, "We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ" (2 Co 10:4,5).

The Word of God has the power to accomplish what God wants it to accomplish. God promised Isaiah, "As the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it" (Is 55:10,11). In fact, apart from the proclamation of God's Word no one can come to faith or be saved (Ro 10:13-17).

The Holy Scriptures are not only efficacious, they are also sufficient to accomplish God's purpose. In the story of the rich man and Lazarus the rich man wanted Lazarus to arise from the dead to warn his brothers so that they would not end up in hell with him. Abraham said, "They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them." But the rich man did not think that would work: "If someone from the dead goes back to them, they

will repent." "Abraham replied, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead'" (Lk 16:27-31).

God's Word and will and ways are often contrary to the way human beings think. "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the Lord. "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts" (Is 55:8,9). God's Word stands above human thought and ultimately stands in judgment of everything humans do. God's Word stands above human culture and human culture is to be judged by God's Word.

8. *In the New Testament forms of worship are matters of adiaphora. Nevertheless forms of worship will flow from a group's theology.*

In the Old Testament God spelled out how he wanted the people of Israel to worship him. In the New Testament there is no ceremonial law (Col 2:16-17). Worship forms are *adiaphora* (they are not commanded or established by God). God has given us the freedom to develop our forms of worship. But even in matters of *adiaphora* there are guidelines. We are not to seek our own good, but the good of others (1 Co 10:24). We are not to do anything that would cause someone to stumble in the faith or that would harm his conscience (1 Co 10:28,29,32). At the same time we are not to let anyone limit the freedom God has given us by calling something sinful that is not or commanding something that God has not commanded (1 Co 10:29,30). We are to do everything to the glory of God (1 Co 10: 31).

Christian freedom does not give us license to do anything and everything in worship. Paul warned the Corinthians about their worship that "everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way" (1 Co 14:40).

Our Savior was particularly critical of the practices of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law. They exalted human traditions and often ignored what the Scriptures said. As a result they substituted dead formalism for scriptural substance. They substituted externals for true worship. They substituted forms for the gospel of forgiveness. Jesus accused them, "You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you: 'These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men'" (Mt 15:7,8).

In matters of *adiaphora* we will always want to examine the reasons why something is being done. People do things for a reason. Worship forms flow out of theology. What people believe (consciously or unconsciously) is reflected in their style of worship. As Lutherans we recognize the importance of the means of grace, the gospel in Word and sacrament. Lutheran worship centers on the Word and sacraments. Our forms of worship give prominence to what our God has said, promised, done, and continues to do through the means of grace. The worship style of a Quaker flows from the Quaker belief in the immediate (apart from the means of grace) working of the Holy Spirit. Revivalist worship involves substituting methods and techniques for the means of grace because of revivalist belief in the free (not bound or dead by nature) will of humans and a misunderstanding of the work of the Holy Spirit. Pentecostal worship lacks structure because Pentecostals believe that liturgical structure inhibits the freedom of the Holy Spirit. Roman Catholic worship centers in the mass. Worship is a reflection of what people believe.

Historical Background

A Brief Review of Some Past Crosscultural Efforts

Ever since the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost the Christian Church has been engaged in crosscultural work. Christians have responded to this challenge in a variety of ways.

The Church in the first three centuries saw the pagan culture of that age as diametrically opposed to the gospel. Christian worship seems to have drawn its forms from the synagogue worship and family devotional life of Jewish believers, rather than from pagan society. Christians did not make it easy for converts. They required a lengthy period of instruction before they were allowed to participate in formal worship or in the sacraments.

These Christian rites were foreign to the pagan converts. The church architecture, sermon, hymns, prayers, and liturgy were quite different from anything the pagans had experienced. The early church was not really very "user friendly."⁴

After the Emperor Constantine made Christianity the favored religion in the Roman Empire the number of "converts" increased dramatically. Instruction in the truths of Christianity declined because of the sheer numbers of those who wanted to become Christian. As the gospel was brought into Northern Europe whole areas came into the church through mass baptisms at the request of rulers. Pagan practices were often given a Christian veneer. Superstition abounded. The failure to instruct these new converts thoroughly in the truths of Scripture brought disastrous results. Allowing converts to retain certain religious practices from their past brought about confusion and even syncretism.

Many Christian missionaries, however, recognized the importance of understanding the culture in which they were working for the proclamation of the gospel. They recognized that the gospel must be proclaimed in language, concepts, and pictures familiar to the people of that culture. They immediately set themselves to the task of learning the native language and translating the Scriptures into that language. For instance, Cyril (826-869) and Methodius (815-885) gave the Slavonic language its alphabet and conducted worship in that language as they did mission work among the Slavs.

Missionaries have always had to struggle with finding the appropriate words in a non-biblical language to convey the message, concepts, and meaning of Scripture. Those doing mission work in another culture always have to consider what can be adopted and adapted from the new culture and what things in that culture must be rejected as contrary to Scripture or tainted with false concepts or connotations. Controversies have occurred in the course of those struggles.

The Chinese Rites Controversy (sometimes called the Accommodation Debate) raged in the Roman Catholic Church for a century. The Jesuit Matteo Ricci (1552-1610) arrived in China in 1582. He and his fellow Jesuits adopted the policy of retaining many traditional Chinese ceremonies and religious terms in their mission work. The Dominicans and Franciscans who came in the 17th century strongly objected to the Jesuits' practice. Because of the distance from Rome and the slowness of transportation and communication, the controversy was difficult to settle. The Jesuit practice was condemned in 1704. That condemnation was upheld by Benedict XIV in 1742 in a final bull dealing with the subject. The Roman Catholic Church suffered numerically in China because of this decision. Nevertheless one Protestant expert on China and Chinese missions believed that this decision was the right one.

It is conviction and the sense of values not to be found elsewhere which in the last analysis must give the church a permanent place in the community, and if the distinctiveness of its message or its loyalty to the truth as it sees it be compromised, its vitality cannot but suffer. The papal decision made the winning of nominal adherents more difficult, but they tended to keep high the standards of the Church. Numbers were sacrificed for vitality.⁵

The Synodical Conference had to deal with nearly the same issues in the early 20th century because of a controversy among missionaries on the Missouri Synod's mission field in China. Should the proper term for God be translated as Shangti or Shen? One was the proper name of a Chinese deity. The other also carried some cultural baggage with it. A committee was established to examine the problem. Prof. John Meyer and Prof. E. E. Kowalke of our synod served as chairman and secretary of that committee, respectively. The committee established principles for dealing with the issue that are pertinent for our work today.

- I. The Committee finds it impossible at present to render a unanimous opinion in the Shen-Shangti question because of the conflicting testimony of the missionaries, to which

⁴ "Roman Redux: Today's Evangelistic Challenge Is Not All That Different Than It Was for the Early Church. An Interview with Robert Louis Wilken." *Christian History*. Vol. XVII, #1, Issue 57, p. 44.

⁵ Kenneth S. Latourette, *A History of Christian Missions in China*. (New York: Russell and Russell, 1967), p. 155.

we, not being Sinologs, must recur for the meaning and use of these terms, and also because of an apparent shifting of position on the part of the Shangti advocates. While Shangti was originally declared to be the proper name of the supreme god of the Chinese pantheon, it is now claimed that Shangti is the equivalent of *theos*.

- II. Under these circumstances the Committee must be content with stating the principles which must guide it in seeking a God-pleasing solution of the difficulty.
- III. In translating from the Hebrew and the Greek into another language, the choice of terms to render *Elohim* and *Theos* is *per se* an adiaphoron. As in the case of all adiaphora (Cf. *Formula Concordiae*, Art. X), Scripture here, too, sets certain bounds within which our freedom may be exercised. Our choice of terms must not smirch the glory and honor of God nor becloud the truth of God nor give offense (in the sense of giving occasion for stumbling) to the weak (1 Cor. 10:31f. and Rom 14:13-23).
- IV. Our one and only mission to the Chinese, to the Christians as well as the heathen among them, is to teach them whatsoever Christ commanded us (Matt. 28:20; 2 Cor. 5:19f.). We must speak the truth in Christ (1 Tim. 2:7 and 2 Cor. 4:2), and our trumpet must not give forth an uncertain sound that may be misunderstood (1 Cor. 14:8f.).⁶

Four members of the committee declared that on the basis of the information presented to them the use of Shangti as a designation for the true God did not conform to the principles expressed. Three members of the committee thought that the term could be divested of its heathen connotation and filled with biblical content. All the members recognized that the practice on the Chinese mission field must be in accord with the principles stated in points III and IV.

The report is noteworthy in that it demonstrates the difficulty in communicating across cultures. It also clearly expresses the scriptural principles that are to be followed in deciding crosscultural issues in missions. Finally it recognizes that people must have a thorough knowledge of the culture on the mission field and of the scriptural principles involved in order to be able to make an intelligent and God-pleasing decision.

Only a few years before this Synodical Conference decision large Protestant denominations in America were forced to wrestle with the findings of the Commission of Appraisal of the Laymen's Foreign Missions Inquiry. In 1932 the Commission published *Rethinking Missions: A Laymen's Inquiry after One Hundred Years*.

The *Inquiry* criticized much of the Protestant missionary effort and argued for the continuation of missions along the following lines. First, missions ought to emphasize social effort, through medicine and other efforts apart from evangelism. Second, missionaries should seek to link their faith with whatever common features they find in non-Christian religions. The aim ought to be cooperation rather than conversion. Third, there ought to be greater unity in missionary activity both between missions and with members of other religions. The ultimate goal ought to be an international fellowship in which each religion would find its appropriate place.⁷

Although the editor of this statement, William Ernest Hocking (1873-1966), a layman and professor of philosophy, received much criticism for the statement, the missiological emphases and cultural attitudes contained in the report eventually came to dominate the mainline Protestant denominations in this country. These attitudes fit very well with the thinking of multiculturalists in the late 20th century.

Historic Developments In Attitudes Toward Religious Truth and Culture

In Reformation times all sides in the controversy recognized the Holy Scriptures as God's Word and God's truth. In the 17th century Pietism began to undermine the objective nature of God's truth with the

⁶ *Proceedings of the Thirty-Sixth Convention of the Ev. Lutheran Synodical Conference of North America, 1938*, p. 134, 135.

⁷ *Dictionary of Christianity in America*. ed. by Daniel G. Reid, et al. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1990), p. 536.

emphasis on Christian experience and the desire for deeds rather than creeds. The 18th century Enlightenment brought a whole new set of problems for Christianity. Until the Enlightenment few in the Christian world would have questioned the truthfulness of Scripture. But with the coming of the Age of Rationalism people began demanding empirical proof to demonstrate the truthfulness of any statement. The scientific method claimed to give verifiable proof. Since the existence of God and many of the teachings of Scripture cannot be scientifically demonstrated, many took an agnostic view toward the teachings of Scripture. Others became hostile. The various critical approaches to the Bible further undermined confidence in what the Bible says.

Georg Hegel (1770-1831) taught an evolutionary or developmental approach to history. He believed that history follows a regular pattern of a thesis which is succeeded by an antithesis. Through the conflict of these two there comes a higher level of development known as a synthesis. Those who followed Hegel's approach saw Christianity as an historic development from more primitive religions. Other Hegelians viewed the early church as a synthesis between the "Jewish" tradition of Peter and its antithesis, the "Gentile" religion of Paul.

Hegel's colleague and rival at the University of Berlin was Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834). Schleiermacher taught that the essence of religion was inner experience. He saw the diversity of religions in this world as being the result of the diversity of feelings and religious experience among the peoples of the world. Schleiermacher's thought was a reaction to both rationalism and Lutheran and Reformed orthodoxy. Both Hegel's and Schleiermacher's approach to religion undermined the uniqueness of Christianity and the importance and authority of the Holy Scriptures and Christian doctrine.

The development of the social sciences (e.g., psychology, sociology, and anthropology) in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries created some new challenges for Christianity because these disciplines often involve some presuppositions that are opposed to the Christian faith. The social sciences soon were given the same kind of honor that was given to the physical sciences. Liberalism in the 19th and 20th century in America tried to adapt the teachings of Christianity to this modern intellectual climate. One theologian who comes from a liberal background (although he now considers himself to be a postliberal) writes, "Liberals start with experience, with an account of the present, and then adjust the vision of the kingdom of God accordingly."⁸ Liberalism allows science, modern philosophy, and the social sciences to establish the religious categories for Christianity instead of Scripture. Liberals adapt the teachings of the Bible to what scientists, philosophers, psychologists, and sociologists are saying. Liberalism sees the Bible as the product of human religious experience. Liberals believe in a progressive revelation and a kind of evolutionary development of religion. Shailer Matthews (1863-1941), a spokesman for modernism (liberalism), explains:

What then is Modernism?...It is the use of the methods of modern science to find, state, and use the permanent values of inherited orthodoxy in meeting the needs of the modern world....Modernists endeavor to reach beliefs and the applications in the same way that chemists or historians reach and apply their conclusions....I believe in the Bible, when interpreted historically, as the product and the trustworthy record of the progressive revelation of God through the developing religious experience.⁹

As with rationalism, liberalism undermines the importance of Christian doctrine and the authority of Scripture. Liberalism conforms Christianity to culture rather than culture to Christianity.

James E. White notes that as modernism developed, four traits or marks emerged: 1) *Moral Relativism*—what is morally true for you is true for you, and what is morally true for me is true for me; 2) *Autonomous Individualism*—ultimate moral authority is self-generated. In the end we answer to no one but ourselves; 3) *Narcissistic Hedonism*—If it makes you happy and doesn't hurt anyone else, then it's okay; 4)

⁸ George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1984), p. 125,126.

⁹ Shailer Matthews, "The Faith of Modernism." *A Documentary History of Religion in America*. ed. by Edwin Gaustad (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing House, 1993), vol. II, p. 396.

Reductive Naturalism—If it cannot be examined in a tangible scientific manner, then it is not simply unknowable, it is meaningless.¹⁰

The dominant philosophy among American intellectuals in the first half of the twentieth century was existentialism. Existentialism links truth to the subject rather than to the object. For existentialist theologians truth does not reside in the objective words of Scripture nor in the historic events in the life of our Savior, but in a human encounter with God. A human being may encounter God in the Scriptures or he may not. A logical consequence of existentialism is that, in the opinion of many today, the reader rather than the text itself determines the meaning of the text.

In America at the beginning of the 19th century a pragmatic approach to religion came as a reaction to the dryness of rationalism. Revivalists developed techniques to bring about conversion experience. They fostered a pragmatic approach to religion. They adopted what seemed to work. The success of their methods could be verified by various physical manifestations of the people involved in the revivals and the sheer numbers of those who had a conversion experience or became members of a Christian denomination. These *methods* became the *means* by which the revivalists accomplished what they wanted. Since Scripture was verified by inner spiritual experience, subjective experience became more important than objective truth. Experiential religion dominates the American religious scene today.

Our society tends to be hostile to confessional Lutheranism because of the effects of rationalism, liberalism, and experiential religion. Many scholars today say that we have entered into a *postmodern* period in which many question the concept of truth or truth claims altogether. Many even question the reliability of scientific proof. People claim that truth is relative. They claim that truth is something that is *subjective and personal* rather than objective and universal. They claim that what is true for you might not be true for me (it all depends on how you look at it and what your situation is). To make a claim that you have the truth and that it is valid for everyone of all time is seen as the height of arrogance. Relativism and pluralistic approaches to truth dominate our culture and society. Modern multiculturalism has developed in this context.

Some Multicultural Presuppositions Examined in the Light of Scripture and History

The word *multiculturalism* can be used in a good sense. It can indicate an interest in learning about other peoples and other customs. True multiculturalism seeks to understand and present the customs, values, and practices of each culture objectively, recognizing what is good in the culture and what is objectionable. In this sense every Christian pastor, missionary, or educator has an interest in other cultures because he wants to be able to communicate the gospel to others in a way they will understand. Everyone who has ever studied a foreign language has struggled to find the right words in that language to express the thoughts and concepts he wants to communicate. Anyone who is observant also recognizes the importance of understanding non-verbal communication. A laugh can convey happiness or embarrassment. A gesture in one culture might take on a completely different meaning in another. Anyone who has traveled to a foreign country will soon recognize that there may be a variety of ways of doing things that are far different from the ways he grew up with. Those who want to communicate the gospel across cultures will want to do everything in their power to understand the new culture in which they are working.

Multiculturalism, as the term is generally used in America today, however, has a different meaning from that described above. Multiculturalism is an ideology and political philosophy that ultimately undermines the Christian message. This will become apparent as we consider three basic presuppositions of this philosophy.

1. *Truth is relative to culture, and every culture can be understood only on its own terms.*

Multiculturalism is based on modern ideas of relativism. Relativism is the view that truth, particularly ethical or moral truth, is dependent on the individuals or groups holding those truths in their particular cultural setting. In

¹⁰ James E. White, "Evangelism in a Postmodern World." in the *Challenge of Postmodernism: An Evangelical Engagement*. ed. by David S. Dockery (Wheaton, Illinois: Victor Books/SP Publications, Inc., 1995), p. 362, 363.

universities today students are often taught that all knowledge is culturally biased. Therefore knowledge is relative and true only within certain social frameworks.¹¹ Values clarification techniques are intended to help an individual recognize what is true for him or her personally rather than what values are valid for human beings in general.

Modern philosophers of science recognize that even scientific or empirical truth is relative to the particular circumstances and theories scientists are working with. In postmodern minds religious truth is even more dependent on the particular cultural setting. Lindbeck observes:

Philosophers of science now often say that, even in the empirically most objective disciplines, all observation terms and all observation sentences are theory-laden. Even in physics and chemistry, "The adoption of a particular theory alters the meaning of the observation terms, that is, alters the facts to be accounted for."...There is no neutral standpoint from which to adjudicate their competing perceptions of what is factual and/or anomalous. Comprehensive outlooks on religion, not to mention religions themselves, are not susceptible to decisive confirmation or disconfirmation.¹²

The author does not simply mean that religious truth cannot be proven scientifically. He is saying that the given cultural situation determines what is true or factual and what is not. The most radical form of this way of thinking is labeled *fideism* by William Placher. He offers this description of what fideism entails:

There are no general criteria of rationality, and religious beliefs can be judged only in the context of the form of life associated with them. Within a given form of life, of course, the associated beliefs always make good sense.¹³

Placher rejects such a radical approach, but the middle ground he offers is not much different or better.

I do not believe there is some universal standard of rationality against which we can measure other cultures or some standpoint outside all cultures from which such judgments could be made. At the same time, I also do not think that it is always impossible to judge a culture's practices as being irrational or that any culture's beliefs are as good as any others. I think the same applies to different religious traditions.¹⁴

According to Placher criticism of a culture comes from within that culture itself. He asks two questions: Does the culture provide means for self-criticism? How does it adjust when it comes in contact with other cultures?

The lack of any universal criteria of rationality, I said, need not imply that there is no way to criticize the beliefs and practices of a particular tradition, if traditions contain within themselves reasons for questioning their own beliefs and practices and, in the natural course of things, encounter challenges from other traditions.¹⁵

Some today believe language to be malleable enough that people can hold to expressions of religious truth that in appearance are diametrically opposed to each other and yet be in basic agreement. For these "experiential-expressive symbolists" such agreement is possible because words are merely expressive of

¹¹ Grant R. Osborne, "Christianity Challenges Postmodernism," *Evangelical Journal*, Vol 15, #1 (Spring 1997), p. 8.

¹² Lindbeck, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

¹³ William G. Placher, *Unapologetic Theology*. (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989), p. 61.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* p. 74.

subjective experience and may evoke different experiences in different people. This explains how inter-denominational and inter-faith dialogues can issue statements of agreement while each side claims to continue to hold to their previous doctrinal position. Lindbeck explains:

For experiential-expressive symbolists, in contrast, religiously significant meanings can vary while doctrines remain the same, and conversely, doctrines can alter without change of meaning. Both transubstantiationist and nontransubstantiationist conceptualities—to continue with the previous example—can express or evoke similar or dissimilar experiences of divine reality, or no experience at all. The general principle is that insofar as doctrines function as nondiscursive symbols, they are polyvalent in import and therefore subject to changes of meaning or even to total loss of meaning, to what Tillich calls their death. They are not crucial for religious agreement or disagreement, because these are constituted by harmony and or conflict in underlying feelings, attitudes, existential orientations, or practices, rather than by what happens on the level of symbolic (including doctrinal) objectifications. There is thus at least the logical possibility that a Buddhist and a Christian might have basically the same faith, although expressed very differently.¹⁶

Lindbeck offers another way of viewing doctrine that allows for agreement in the face of conflicting statements. He sees doctrine as rules that are firm but apply only in certain cultural or historical contexts. For example, rules for baseball are firm in that game, but don't apply in contexts of other sports. Americans must drive on the right side of a two-lane road with two-lane traffic, but this rule does not apply in England. In England the rule says that one must drive on the left side.

It has become customary in a considerable body of anthropological, sociological, and philosophical literature...to emphasize neither the cognitive nor the experiential-expressivist aspects of religion; rather, emphasis is placed on those respects in which religions resemble languages together with their correlative forms of life and are thus similar to cultures (insofar as they are understood semiotically as reality and value systems—that is, as idioms for the construing of reality and the living of life). The function of church doctrines that becomes most prominent in this perspective is their use, not as expressive symbols or as truth claims, but as communally authoritative rules of discourse, attitude, and action. The general way of conceptualizing religion will be called in what follows a "cultural-linguistic" approach, and the implied view of church doctrine will be referred to as a "regulative" or "rule" theory.

A regulative approach has no difficulty explaining the possibility of reconciliation without capitulation. Rules, unlike propositions or expressive symbols, retain an invariant meaning under changing conditions of compatibility and conflict. For example, the rules "Drive on the left" and "Drive on the right" are unequivocal in meaning and unequivocally opposed, yet may be binding: one in Britain and the other in the United States, or one when traffic is normal, and the other when a collision must be avoided. Thus oppositions between rules can in some instances be resolved, not by altering one or both of them, but by specifying when or where they apply, or by stipulating which of the competing directives take precedence. Similarly, to return to the eucharistic example, both transubstantiation and at least some of the doctrines that appear to contradict it can be interpreted as embodying rules of sacramental thought and practice that may have been in unavoidable and perhaps irresolvable collision in certain historical contexts, but that can in other circumstances be harmonized by appropriate specifications of their respective domains, uses, and priorities.¹⁷

¹⁶ Lindbeck, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 17,18.

Some even claim to see different worldviews in the various books of the Bible. They believe that the various books of the Bible are products of different "faith" communities, each having a different worldview with each of these worldviews appropriate for its cultural context. Those who hold this view explain denominational differences in terms of one denomination picking up on one worldview in the Bible and another denomination picking up on a different worldview.

Here, then, are five examples of diverse worldviews in the New Testament. These worldviews represent penetrating analyses of our human condition, profound visions of what human life might become, and powerful ways to effect transformation and change. We need all these diverse views and more as resources to address the complex and difficult circumstances in our world today. We could go on to look at other worldviews in the New Testament: the holiness model of 1 Peter, the pilgrimage theology of the letter to the Hebrews, the condemnation of idolatry in the book of Revelation, and the diverse theological perspectives in different Pauline letters. We could also explore the great diversity of smaller traditions that lie embedded within New Testament writings. All would reinforce the basic notion that in the New Testament canon there are many different ways of viewing the world and of understanding the ways God works to transform the world.¹⁸

Diversity in Christianity is honored when we recognize that different denominations are legitimately rooted in the different New Testament witnesses (including many independent congregations not affiliated with a denomination). For example, discussions between Roman Catholics and Lutherans suggest that while the Lutheran view is faithful to Paul's theology, the Roman Catholic view is faithful to Matthew's view. Now what does that say about fellowship between denominations when both groups—though in disagreement—are equally and validly rooted in the biblical materials?¹⁹

The denial of absolute truth and universal concepts results in the inability to point out error or condemn false teaching. When relativism dominates, the gospel becomes irrelevant or merely one religious philosophy among many, neither better or worse than the others.

2. *All cultures and religions are equal to every other. Each culture and religion not only cannot be criticized by those outside it, but each has divine truth from which other cultures and religions can learn.*

Relativism naturally results in a kind of pluralism that views every culture as equally good and every religion as ultimately a different road to the same god. If truth is relative, then everyone must be tolerant of everyone else's truth claims.

Since modern culture is defined by diversity, and since no single view or movement can be more true than any other, everyone must respect the beliefs and distinctives of the others. Carson speaks of three kinds of pluralism: (1) empirical pluralism, or recognizing and respecting the incredible diversity in our society; (2) cherished pluralism, or the necessity of approving the equality of all races, ideologies, and worldviews in society; and (3) philosophical pluralism, or the belief that no particular religion or worldview can be superior to another. In other words, the only "wrong" is saying that any other person's beliefs are wrong!²⁰

¹⁸ David Rhoads, *The Challenge of Diversity: The Witness of Paul and the Gospels*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), p. 139.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 145.

²⁰ Osborne, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

While the Christian will recognize and respect the beliefs of others and view all races as equal before God, the Christian cannot approve the equality of every ideology and worldview. In American society today the homosexual or gay community is considered a subculture whose views cannot be condemned.²¹ Since postmodern thought claims that truth is relative, there can be no such thing as moral absolutes.

Multiculturalism logically ends in universalism, the belief that everyone will finally be saved. Denying the Reformation principle of *sola scriptura*, modern pluralists find god and god's truth in every religion. Every religion is a legitimate way to the same god. After writing approvingly of interfaith dialogue, cooperative social projects, and joint worship services, one author contends:

Our first task in approaching another people, another culture, another religion is to take off our shoes. For the place we are approaching is holy. Else we may find ourselves treading on another's dreams, [and] more seriously still, we may forget that God was there before our arrival.²²

Multiculturalist assumptions make Christianity a dialogue partner with other religions rather than a proclaimer of God's eternal, absolute truth. Some will go so far as to claim that the task of the Christian in dialogue with other religions may be to help them be better adherents of their false religions.

It can be argued in a variety of ways that Christian churches are called upon to imitate their Lord by selfless service to neighbors quite apart from the question of whether this promotes conversions. They also have scriptural authorization in such passages as Amos 9:7,8 for holding that nations other than Israel—and, by extension, religions other than biblical ones—are also peoples elected (and failing) to carry out their own distinctive tasks within God's world. If so, not everything that pertains to the coming of the kingdom has been entrusted to that people of explicit witness which knows what and where Jerusalem is and (as believers hope) marches toward it, if only in fits and starts. It follows from these considerations that Christians may have a responsibility to help other movements and other religions make their own particular contributions, which may be quite distinct from the Christian one, to the preparation for the Consummation. The missionary task of Christians may at times be to encourage Marxists to become better Marxists, Jews and Muslims to become better Jews and Muslims, and Buddhists to become better Buddhists (Although admittedly their notion of what a "better Marxist," etc., is will be influenced by Christian norms). Obviously this cannot be done without the most intensive and arduous conversation and cooperation.²³

Multiculturalism changes the nature of Christianity from a missionary religion with claims of absolute truth to an equal dialogue partner with other religions. Adopting this view means that Christianity must give up its "exclusivist" views of salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone revealed in Scripture alone.

3. *Western culture as the dominant culture an America is responsible for the problems of our society past and present. It is therefore permissible to criticize Western culture, but not to criticize other cultures. Christianity is to be criticized and ridiculed because it is part of Western culture.*

²¹ Alvin J. Schmidt, *The Menace of Multiculturalism: Trojan Horse in America*. (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 1997), p. 73-77, 144-147.

²² Alan Neely, "Religious Pluralism: Threat or Opportunity for Mission?" *Currents in Theology and Mission*. Vol. 25, #2 (April 1998), p. 115.

²³ Lindbeck, *op. cit.*, p. 54.

The Australian-born author Robert Hughes takes issue with both political conservatives and multiculturalists for some of their assumptions about American and Western culture. Conservatives overstate the case for the necessity of preserving the Western canon for the preservation of American culture. Multiculturalists act as if Western culture were a monolithic whole. Both sides tend to generalize and both fail to recognize the cultural diversity that there has always existed in the West. Western Europe contains a diversity of national cultures. There is no one solid "Eurocentric" mass literature and thought. As Hughes writes:

You do not have to listen very long to the arguments on the other side before sensing that, in quite a few of its proponents' minds, multiculturalism means something less than genuine curiosity about other cultural forms. The first casualty of this idea is Europe itself—for how can anyone with the slightest acquaintance with the enormous, rich, contradictory range of European literature and thought presume that it forms one solid "Eurocentric" mass, "as if," in Russell Jacoby's words, "Adolph Hitler and Anne Frank represented the same world"? We hear people invoke something they call Latin-American culture (as distinct from the "repressive" culture of the Anglo) without realizing what coarse generalizations the phrase implies.²⁴

Nevertheless, multiculturalists see Western culture as a monolith that is responsible for many of society's problems. The way to overcome these problems is to ignore the good and emphasize the bad in Western culture and to ignore the bad and emphasize only the good in other cultures. Often this involves either a re-writing of history or a romanticizing of conditions in America before European immigration. Some schools have begun using textbooks that take such a revisionist approach to history.²⁵

Another option is to ignore the study of Western culture and place the main curricular emphasis on minority cultures. Consequently, courses in Western civilization that were once a part of every liberal arts program are on the decline at many colleges and universities. For instance, in 1995 the president of Yale University returned a \$20 million gift because the donor had specified that it be used for developing courses in Western history and culture.²⁶

Multiculturalism embraces Liberation Theology which sees western culture dominated by white males as oppressive. Liberationists often point to capitalism as the source of problems for the poor and downtrodden. Liberation Theology contends that the church's responsibility is to liberate those who are politically, socially, or economically oppressed. This approach to Christianity substitutes orthopraxis for orthodoxy. Liberationists don't concentrate on the theological questions: What is true? What does the Bible say? What does this mean? What are the theological implications? Instead they operate with a hermeneutic of suspicion by which they look for the basic ideological commitments implicit in every theology. Liberationists ask, "Does this theology bring about liberation for those oppressed?" Verification of a theological position lies in its conformity to the process of liberation.²⁷

Liberation Theology sees revolution (violent or non-violent) as necessary to overthrow the structures of power, because reform is too slow and the ruling class often "co-opts" such movements. The oppressed must be empowered. Therefore American society dominated by white males and American culture itself must be changed. This theology switches the focus of Christianity from saving people for eternity to saving them from political or economic oppression in this life.

Since multiculturalists link Christianity to Western culture, Christianity is often seen as the source of much injustice. Radical feminists and gay rights activists see the scriptural condemnations of the sin of homosexuality and the scriptural principles of the roles of men and women as oppressive.

²⁴ Robert Hughes, *Culture of Complaint: A Passionate Look into the Heart of Ailing America*. (New York: Warner Books, 1993), p. 103-104.

²⁵ Schmidt, op. cit., p. 46-61.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 164.

²⁷ *Dictionary of Christianity in America*, p. 649.

At their recent national convention in Salt Lake City the Southern Baptists adopted an article of faith that states, "A wife is to submit herself graciously to the servant leadership of her husband even as the church willingly submits to the headship of Christ." A Religious News Service article entitled "Baptists Open Another Front in the Culture Wars" notes that this statement "could be viewed as a stand not only for wives' submission but against homosexuality, divorce and feminism."²⁸ A subsequent article entitled "Surviving the Sad Spectacle of the Southern Baptists" criticizes the denomination for the various stands taken at the convention. The article states, "In the name of one who loved his enemies, the nation's largest Protestant denomination devoted their annual meeting to heaping scorn on everyone from gays to feminists to the president to their Mormon hosts."²⁹ Although we might fault the Southern Baptists for the political overtones of some of their actions, we recognize that they are being ridiculed for stating what the Bible teaches about God's appointed roles for men and women, the sin of homosexuality, and false religions such as Mormonism.

Multiculturalist attitudes prompted the National Council of Churches on the five hundredth anniversary of Columbus' discovery of America to condemn Christian missionaries for destroying the native religious beliefs of the people who originally inhabited this country.³⁰ According to multiculturalism it is not politically correct today to carry out our Savior's Great Commission. Christianity is condemned for opposing false religions and transforming cultures through the proclamation of the gospel.

Summary and Conclusion

Multiculturalism is an ideology that is hostile to Christianity. Its relativistic approach to religious truth denies the inerrancy and infallibility of Scripture and the moral accountability of human beings before God. Its radical pluralism denies salvation by grace through faith in Christ alone. Its anti-Christian bias often exalts false religions while condemning Christian truth.

Confessional Lutherans will recognize that there is much in American culture to be criticized. American history is not pure. American culture is neither neutral nor necessarily Christian. Our society's materialism, pragmatism, moral relativism, and emphasis on experiential confirmation of religious truth must be rejected. God's Word stands in judgment of every human culture.

A confessional Lutheran approach to other cultures lets Scripture rather than the social sciences determine the categories and strategies. We first of all inquire what the Bible says and then we apply Scripture to the problems and trends of society. Confessional Lutherans recognize that a person must have a thorough knowledge of a culture to recognize what can be adapted for worship and evangelism and what cannot. We recognize the importance of a thorough knowledge of scriptural principles of worship to understand what can be used in worship and what should be avoided. Lutheran worship is theocentric and christocentric rather than anthropocentric. Lutherans will take the best of every culture and use it to the glory of God. Martin Luther's genius was to recognize what was valuable and should be retained and what was not and should be discarded. He had a keen ability to recognize what properly served the gospel. He rejected whatever was used as a substitute for the gospel. In Lutheran worship the liturgical forms and music are intended to carry the gospel, not replace it.

Confessional Lutherans are ready and willing to wrestle with matters of adiaphora so that everything can be done to God's glory, the conversion of sinners, and the edification of his people.

May God give us the wisdom and the willingness to work and strive and study to that end.

²⁸ Adelle M. Banks, "Baptists Open Another Front in the Culture Wars." Religious News Service, June 12, 1998.

²⁹ Tom Ehrich, "Surviving the Sad Spectacle of the Southern Baptists." Religious News Service, June 16, 1998.

³⁰ Schmidt, *op. cit.*, p. 170.