

# Theology Transforming Culture

*Editorial: Paul R. House*

**Paul R. House**, editor of *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology*, is Professor of Old Testament Interpretation at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. He is the author, editor, or co-editor of seven volumes, and has contributed several articles to journals and collections of essays.

There is no reasonable doubt that theology transforms culture or that culture requires constant renewal. All that remains in question is what sort of theology will impact society the most. Those who reject outright or alter the scriptural portrait of God cannot sufficiently anchor personal and societal ethics in divine reality. At best, they must negotiate social contracts based on what seems viable for the community at the moment. In contrast, those who adhere to the Bible possess the opportunity to derive lasting opinions about the nature and destiny of human beings, the character and purpose of creation, the proper approach to justice, and the stability of truth versus error from an enduring definition of God. This biblically-informed worldview can in turn define the role of theology in the church, academic circles, and society, thus transforming culture appropriately.

The biblical portrait of God must stand at the forefront of any attempt to transform culture. Scripture teaches that God is the eternal, unaided creator of all that has been made. It asserts that God is the giver of understandable objective standards by which people must live, the savior and judge of sinners, and the one who will bring history to a just end. God's character is defined as holy (Lv 11:44), righteous and merciful at the same time (Ex 34:6-7), and loving (Hos 11:1-7). God's being is said to endure intact "from everlasting to everlasting" (Ps 90:1-2). Jesus Christ claimed to be one with the Father and Holy Spirit (Jn 15:26-27), which means the Trinity shares these personal traits.

Both the Old and New Testaments state that the documents just cited are God's word, and that they are therefore perfect and inspired (Ps 19:7-11; 2 Ti 3:16-17). God's written word has rightly been deemed infallible and inerrant by traditional evangelicals, for it embodies the character of God. The Bible's authority and accuracy are inextricably linked to what may be said with certainty about God. Simply stated, the scriptures teach that God does not need to improve, for God is eternally perfect. They also claim that God's response to suffering, oppression, and sin (whether individual or societal) is constantly appropriate.

This definition of God as a living, personal, fully-mature, wholly consistent, compassionate, constantly perfect being ought to provide sufficient contours for discussion about theology and culture in the church and the academy. Sadly, such is not always the case. Scholars and pastors committed to some level of biblical errancy often define God along non-biblical lines. Or, they use the Bible's few and highly-nuanced statements about God and change to argue that the Lord is either in the process of becoming greater over time, or that God refuses to know future contingent events so that human freedom will not be broached. They either envision a deity who, like people, must grow and mature over time, or a God who cannot intervene in human events when such intervention would allegedly hamper free will. They are joined these days by some inerrantists who read the text as they do.

This sort of definition of God is often considered more acceptable to postmodern persons than other depictions, but it leaves cultural transformation dependent on a less-than-sufficient God revealed in a less-than-sufficient scripture. Thus, it leaves society with no fully reliable way to know how, why, or what this God has said about justice, morality, and the future. It leaves Christians who take this approach with a God whose ability to answer prayer is sharply curtailed. It seemingly lets God off the hook on issues of evil and suffering, yet leaves the sufficiency of the creator to guide creation and the value and dignity of suffering much in doubt. It leaves society without a God who has clearly and infallibly revealed, for example, that evil persons are behind such atrocities as the holocaust, child molestation, murder, and the like, and without a God who has the power and moral authority to judge all sin. We may feel that such a God is more like us than traditional definitions, but we pay dearly for this self-justifying and ultimately-hollow sentiment.

The God of scripture reveals that all persons deserve fair, loving, and wise treatment because they are made in God's image (Ge 1:26). Jesus argued that when we treat another person badly or well we are treating God badly or well (Mt 25:31-46). Human dignity cannot be separated from God's dignity. Clearly, a society that would be free of racism, committed to open and fair courts, dedicated to making just laws that match the severity of punishment and crime, and determined to eliminate poverty and family disintegration needs a God who considers such sins personal affronts. Jesus taught that love of God and love of neighbor cannot be separated (Mt 22:34-40). The whole of scripture bears witness that God always

operates out of love, yet is never stripped of power in the process.

This issue of *SBJT* focuses on several of these matters. D. A. Carson's article is taken from *The Gagging of God*, his landmark volume on the cultural factors Christianity faces. Carson forges new ways of engaging the current cultural crisis while maintaining contact with biblical descriptions of God. Millard Erickson examines God and change, a subject closely connected to how much one can link God's character to ethical issues. T. Vaughn Walker addresses cultural and theological matters that affect African-American churches. Robert Yarbrough's treatment of Adolf Schlatter's "The Significance of Method for Theological Work" offers pastors an effective interpretative methodology. The *SBJT* Forum discusses various ways theologians are attempting to shape culture.

Biblical truth correctly applied to significant cultural issues will reflect God's beauty and effectiveness. It may also lead to some uncomfortable conclusions or confrontations, but current culture cries out for an eternally strong God whose compassions are new every morning. The good news is that this God is portrayed in scripture.