

Worldviews and Culture: Interacting with Charles Kraft, N. T. Wright, & Scripture

by Ralph Allan Smith

For me, as a missionary to Japan, the question of culture is an inescapable and important issue. I am forced to confront my own cultural prejudices, consider the culture of the Japanese, and ask myself what, as a Christian, I ought to think about all sorts of things that I would have taken for granted if I had remained at home in America. I am personally thankful that God called me to this land and that He has given me the opportunity to learn things that I would probably not have reflected on otherwise. I am also, as a Christian minister very much aware of the importance of culture for the future of our local church and the future of Christianity in Japan. For cultural matters have a profound impact. Cultural attitudes may bolster or belittle one's faith in Christ. Cultural beliefs and habits that we hardly take note of may advance our understanding of the Bible or blind us to obvious truths.

With all of that in mind, in this short essay on culture, I intend to interact briefly with the views of Charles Kraft since he is among the most influential missionary teachers, setting standards for the way missionaries and even theologians think about culture and worldview. It is my opinion that Kraft's basic notion of a worldview and his understanding of how worldviews and cultures are to be related veer dangerously from the Biblical path. I hope that I can explain why I believe that to be the case and also to very briefly introduce N. T. Wright's approach to the question of worldview, which I believe to be more Biblical and helpful than Kraft's. I also offer some observations of my own.

Charles Kraft

In 1980, Carl F. H. Henry offered a devastating review of Charles H. Kraft's *Christianity in Culture*. Henry does not deny that Kraft *intends* to be an evangelical, true to the historical faith of the Church, but he demonstrates clearly and irrefutably that if Kraft really wishes to maintain the faithfulness to the truth that he professes, he will have to offer major revisions of his views of Christianity and culture.

Henry's critique leaves little doubt about how deep and serious Charles Kraft's theological problems are. His article includes the following insights:

Along with the anthropologist Monica Wilson, he insists that our ideas must change as societies change (*Religion and the Transformation of Society* [Cambridge: University Press, 1971] 5)—an idea, presumably, that Wilson and Kraft consider impervious to change.

Kraft indicates that no universal criteria are applicable to all cultures and that each culture is valid only for its own participants (*ibid.* 49). None can be regarded as final, and no transcendently absolute criterion is allowed to judge any. Kraft declares this belief in the

validity of other cultures to be the equivalent in anthropology of the Golden Rule in theology (ibid. 99). Yet cultural validity, Kraft says, does not oblige us to approve of customs like cannibalism, widow-burning, infanticide, polygamy and premarital sex (ibid. 50). On what basis can an emphasis on mere cultural validity identify any practices as universally wicked and sinful? Kraft writes of “the American assumption” that having sexual relations with someone other than one’s first wife is adultery (ibid. 6). If vices and virtues are conceptually untransferable from one cultural context to another, why should any or all be considered universally normative or abhorrent?

But in any event he can provide no objective basis for approving monogamy, democracy, capitalism, self-determination, or military preparedness, above antithetical views, that is, polygamy, tyranny, communism, enslavement, or military weakness. While he writes of every culture being in some respects “stronger” than others, the term “stronger” cannot reflect objective gradations of truth or morality. Kraft’s assumptions provide no basis for regarding any culture as either superior or inferior to any other.

God limits himself to the capacities of “imperfect and imperfectible, finite, limited” culture, and has done so even in the incarnation of Christ (ibid. 115). God uses “human language with all its finiteness, its relativity, and its *assured misperception* of infinity” (ibid. 114, emphasis mine). If Kraft means what he here says, we should distrust his own claims about God and his relations. But Kraft is much more vocal about the infallibility of others than about his own.

[A]ll human understandings of God’s revelation and all behavior-responses are culture-conditioned and none is to be considered universally valid or true (ibid. 123).

While Kraft insists on evaluation of cultural behavior, he holds that the “meaning of that behavior is derived entirely from within the other’s system, never from ours or from some ‘cosmic pool’ or universal meanings” (ibid. 124-125). The fact that God revealed some truths pertaining only to the Hebrews is invoked to justify the notion of the culture-relativity of all revelational information (ibid. 126).

Scriptural teachings are devalued as culturally conditioned while modern communication theories are assimilated to the revelation of the Spirit (ibid. 169fl.).

Kraft warns us that the New Testament is largely phrased in “Greek conceptual categories (rather than in supracultural categories)” (ibid. 130).

For Kraft, the “functions and meanings behind” the doctrinal forms hold priority. He leaves “largely negotiable” in terms of divergent cultural matrixes “the cultural forms in which these constant functions are expressed” (ibid. 118). “There is, I believe, no absoluteness to the human formulation of...doctrine,” he says, but “the meaning conveyed by a particular doctrine... is of primary concern to God” (ibid. 118). Here Kraft deflates and relativizes the doctrines of the Bible and the creeds of Christendom. Meanwhile he presumes not only to articulate the supracultural mind of God, but to entrench his own debatable doctrine as the rule to which he accommodates all else. He ranges Jesus against the Pharisees and against evangelical doctrinal orthodoxy and contends that Jesus considered beliefs and practices “simply the cultural vehicles” through which “the eternal message of God” is to be expressed and which must be continually updated to fulfill this function (ibid. 119).

“No cultural symbols have exactly the same meanings in any two cultures” (*ibid.* 138). Kraft apparently does not intend to say that his own use of cultural-symbols invalidates or precludes an understanding of his meaning; the meanings Kraft forges at Fuller Seminary presumably are reduction-resistant.¹

The radical cultural relativism of Kraft’s approach is apparent. Henry’s trenchant evaluation of Kraft should have been more than enough of a warning to evangelical theologians and missionaries to beware the quicksand of cultural relativism.

There is, I believe, one point that might be added to Henry’s shattering analysis. It is a methodological point that may help show how it is that Kraft departed so far from the Biblical standard. First, we need to consider Kraft’s notion of a worldview. The issue primarily theological, but we may note in passing that Kraft went through something of a conversion experience, which he considers a change of worldview. Since the late 1980’s Kraft has joined the charismatic Christians in affirming the continuing validity of sign miracles — while, ironically, maintaining his cultural relativism and the denial of the continuing validity of Biblical cultural norms. For some reason, he does not seem to regard his own conversion to a new theology as a cultural matter, even though theology and worldview are generally subsumed under culture in Kraft’s theory.

This brings us to the key issue for understanding Kraft’s methodological problem — his understanding of the idea of a worldview. For Kraft, a worldview is the “culturally structured assumptions, values, and commitments underlying a people’s perception of REALITY.”² In an explanation of cultural structuring, Kraft repeats the phrase “culture, including worldview” at least four times as he introduces his major points.³ Worldview, in other words, is repeatedly seen as subordinate to culture and is regarded virtually as a product of one’s culture.

For this reason, Kraft objects to Christians speaking of either a Biblical worldview or the Biblical worldview. Kraft believes that the notion of a particular worldview being Biblical “could easily be misconstrued to imply either that there is only one cultural worldview in the Bible (which there isn’t) or that God endorses one or another of those worldviews as normative for everyone (which he doesn’t).”⁴ Kraft goes on to explain,

The use of the term worldview in this way easily misleads Western people into believing that God endorses Hebrew cultural perspectives on life. But there is nothing sacred about Hebrew perspectives, even though they are connected with the Bible. They simply make up a human culture that God was pleased to work through to reveal something much more important.⁵

¹ All of the above quotations come from Carl F. H. Henry, “The Cultural Relativizing of Revelation” in the *Trinity Journal*, Fall, 1980, pp. 153-164.

² Charles H. Kraft, *Christianity with Power: Your Worldview and Your Experience of the Supernatural* (Ann Arbor: Servant Publications, 1989), p. 20. Emphasis in the original.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 54-55.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

Again, a few pages later, Kraft adds,

A position that sees it necessary for people to totally replace their cultural worldview with something called a Christian worldview does not really understand the Scriptures. God is not against culture in this way, though he has plenty to say in opposition to many sociocultural beliefs and practices.⁶

Though Kraft believes that Jesus had a worldview, he does not seem to want to say that all Christians should adopt Jesus' view and make it the basis of Christian civilization. Instead, we are told that Jesus' worldview "provides for us the clearest picture of how God's ideals are to be combined with the human perspectives of a typical worldview."⁷ We are supposed to imitate this combination of God's ideals with a human worldview because God wants to work in and through our own socio-cultural matrix.

If the concept of a worldview begins to seem rather murky and if the relationship between culture and worldview seems to be so complex that we can hardly imagine how it is that we can distinguish God's ideals in the worldview of Jesus from those merely cultural worldview perspectives with which Jesus' worldview was united, we are apparently supposed to find comfort in the thought that the science of cultural anthropology can sort all of this out for us. We might have had more confidence in Kraft's ability to correctly distinguish the permanent from the transient if he had been able to give us an intellectually coherent explanation of culture and worldview. As it is, we have a formulation that is complex in part because of sloppy theology, though the subject itself is indeed not simple.

Worldview and Culture

To consider the relationship between culture and worldview, we need to return to the Scriptures and consider the question in the light of Biblical history, in which it is clear beyond doubt that we meet multiple cultures. Abraham lived in Canaan as a shepherd. Joseph lived in Egypt at the Pharaohs court. Joshua led Israel into Canaan to build a new nation. David and Solomon were kings of a kingdom that was far more advanced than anything previous in Israel's history. Daniel served in the court of Babylon as Joseph did in Egypt, though Babylon's culture was very different. Ezra and the captives who returned to the land served God under the Persians, as later Jews served God under Greeks and Romans. Throughout the history of God's people, there are cultural changes of significant proportions, both within the nation of Israel itself and within the nations that ruled over her after the captivity. Even the lives of a single man include gross cultural changes. Moses began his life in Pharaoh's court, fled to the land of Midian, returned briefly to Egypt, and then ended his life in the desert. He spent approximately 40 years each in three very different cultural environments. Joseph and Daniel, too, experienced basic cultural change when they were forcibly placed in the courts of foreign kings.

Cultural change, then, is something that the Bible contains much of, though there is nothing of the hand-wringing fear of a communication breakdown that we encounter among modern cultural gurus, even though there are striking examples of communication problems (Ac.

⁶ Ibid., p. 106.

⁷ Ibid., p. 106.

14:8-18). If we ask a basic question about culture and worldview — whether worldviews are subordinate to cultures — we can gain insights that clarify the picture. Are worldviews cultural products? If they are, then Moses had at least three different worldviews in his lifetime, Daniel and Joseph at least two. Every change of culture would necessarily include some sort of worldview conversion. Is this really what the Bible presents? Did Daniel change his view of the world when he was carried away to Babylon? After a few years of Babylonian education, was Daniel converted to a new worldview, one fundamentally different from the one taught to him by his parents back in Judah? If cultural change means worldview change, we have to see Daniel himself and the people of God throughout the ages as undergoing repeated and significant changes in worldview, according to the culture in which they lived.

This seems an exceedingly peculiar way of viewing things. It would impose upon the Bible a view of culture and worldview that would necessarily imply that diverse cultures within the Bible involved diverse worldviews. That appears, in fact, to be what Kraft wishes to say. But it flies in the face of the apparent unity of worldview among men like Abraham, Moses and Daniel as well as statements that specifically instruct us that God's word is relevant for all times and places, that the things which happened to peoples in other times and cultures are recorded for our instruction (Rom. 15:4).

It also flies in the face of an adequate notion of worldview. For a worldview is nothing other than our basic way of viewing the world. Words that are roughly synonymous with worldview are theology and religion. Our theology tells us who God is and what He has done in the world. It gives us the basic presuppositions and perspectives on the world that define what we call "worldview." In the same way, the word religion is relatively close to the notion of worldview. One's religion includes basic perspectives on the nature of God, man, and the world, the kind of perspectives that are included in what we call "worldview." When we reconsider the question of culture and worldview by using words that are rough synonyms of worldview, the issue becomes clearer.

Did Moses have three theologies or three religions, corresponding to the three cultural phases of his life? Did the nation of Israel change its theology from the time that it was in the wilderness to the time of conquest to the time of the kingdom? Did Daniel and Joseph change religions when they changed cultures? The questions need only be asked to be answered. Obviously, the notion of theology or religion is larger than culture. The same theology can form the foundation for more than one culture. People in different Biblical cultures had the same religion and worshipped the same God, even when there were significant cultural changes in the mode of worship, as for example, when the people went into captivity.

To make culture include religion, theology, or worldview is to make ideas culturally relative. It undermines the possibility of true intercultural communication, not only between man and man, but also between God and man, for God is a Trinitarian society, a culture in Himself. When we see that Biblically the same worldview can characterize people with different cultures, it should be obvious that worldview cannot be regarded as a product of culture. Truth transcends culture. In fact, a false idea, too, can transcend culture — as, in our day, the theories of evolution and of cultural relativity do. It is a fundamental error to imagine that worldview is included in culture, an error that leads to verbal and intellectual confusion, not to mention significant theological problems.

Worldview and Worldviews

It is also an error to oversimplify the notion of worldview. The word can be and is used to refer to more than one level of presuppositional commitment. From one perspective, then, there is only one worldview in the Bible, one which believes in God as the creator, man as His image, the covenant as the defining relationship between God and man as well as man and man, and looks to Jesus' cross and resurrection as the basis of salvation and future judgment as the final solution to the problems of the world. But within the lives of Biblical writers and the experience of God's people, there are significant changes that may legitimately be called worldview changes.

Daniel, again, is a good example. No doubt, Daniel was challenged by various aspects of Babylonian culture and found his views influenced in some way by the world around him. However, it is not the cultural aspects of Daniel's views that are brought to our attention in the book of Daniel. What we read about is a man, a prophet, who was confronted with revelation from God that was unpleasant in the extreme. God was going to bring Israel back to the Promised Land, as He had promised, but she would never again be an independent nation. The times of the Gentiles had come. That was so unexpected that it changed Daniel's worldview — using the word more broadly, rather than limiting it to the highest and most comprehensive beliefs. Daniel saw things about Israel's future that troubled him and made him feel physically sick, he was so unprepared for them (Dan. 7:15, 28; 8:27; 10:2-3, 8, 15-17; 12:8). Daniel did not suffer a worldview crisis because of the king of Babylon, the magicians, the soothsayers, or the wisdom and culture of Babylon. The God of the Bible shook him up. God is a God who changes our view of things. He is always leading His people to greater revelation of Himself, and in the process, He is not always careful to conform to our views. Our worldview, in other words, is usually too neat and narrow to encompass the real reality of things. So, God comes along and surprises us, as He did Habakkuk and Jonah, for example. They were offended that God had the audacity to do things so utterly contrary to their sense of what was right and good. But God did it anyway.

Worldview is complicated in other ways, too. There is a sense, for example, in which the Pharisees may be said to share the same worldview with Jesus. They believe in one God the Creator of heaven and earth. They hoped for the Messiah to save God's people, if not the world. They defined right and wrong by the law of God — sort of. They believed that history would end with God coming in judgment and that there would be an eternal heaven and hell. At this level, their view of the world seems to be essentially the same as that of Jesus and His disciples, but Jesus denounced them in language that suggests they held an entirely different view of the world than He did (especially, Matthew 23). His parables challenge their interpretation of history and the their hopes for the people of God. Jesus even claimed that they did not know God, that they and He did not believe in the same God (Jn. 8:19, 23-24, 27, 37-59). These are differences so fundamental that we have to say that the Pharisees and Jesus had different worldviews.

Worldview and Theology

The New Testament theologian N. T. Wright offers an introduction to the subject of worldview that is more perceptive and helpful than Kraft's, one that offers correctives for his views. In Wright's understanding, a worldview is a basically theological concept, for it answers questions about a persons ultimate concern. Though it may not contain what Western thought would regard as a "god" concept, it includes men's beliefs about ultimate reality and, therefore, answers questions that could be called theological. Worldviews are, he explains, "the basic stuff of human existence, the lens through which the world is seen, the blueprint for how one should live in it and above all the sense of identity and place which enables human beings to be what they are."⁸ Wright adds a warning; the word "worldview" may lead us to think too much in terms of the metaphor of sight, whereas an adequate understanding will lead us to something broader.⁹

Wright outlines "four things which worldviews characteristically do."¹⁰ The first point on Wright's list, and the one which receives greatest emphasis, is that worldviews "provide the *stories* through which human beings view reality." This is a point not usually introduced in discussions of worldview, though according to Wright, "Narrative is the most characteristic expression of worldview, going deeper than the isolated observation or fragmented remark."¹¹

Second, worldviews answer basic questions that determine human existence: "who are we, where are we, what is wrong, and what is the solution."¹² Third, worldviews come to expression in cultural symbols, including both "artifacts and events." Passover, the temple, and the sacrifices, for example, were important cultural symbols for first century Jews. Whether or not one observes the symbols often determines whether one is in or out of the group. Fourth, worldviews determine "praxis" which Wright defines as "a way-of-being-in-the-world." This means simply that "the real shape of someone's worldview can often be seen in the sort of actions they perform, particularly if the actions are so instinctive or habitual as to be taken for granted."¹³

Wright also speaks of the relationship between worldview and culture. When expounding the second point, he writes, "All cultures cherish deep-rooted beliefs which can in principle be called up to answer these questions."¹⁴ The third point is explicitly stated as cultural in that "symbols" are said to be "cultural symbols." But Wright's exposition does not suggest that cultures determine worldviews in such a way that we should have to think of Abraham, Moses, and Daniel as possessing significantly different worldviews. On the contrary, they all share the same basic story of the world, though the story is a more fully developed one for Daniel than it is for Abraham or Moses.

In Wright's view, culture "denotes particularly praxis and symbols of a society." The word "religion" he defines as focusing upon symbol and praxis but it "draws more specific attention to the fact that symbol and praxis point beyond themselves. To a controlling story or

⁸ N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), p. 124.

⁹ Ibid., pp. 122-23.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 123.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., 124.

¹⁴ Ibid., 123.

set of controlling stories which invest them with wider significance.” Theology, in Wright’s analysis, “concentrates on the questions and answers, and focuses specifically on certain aspects of them.” The notions of “imagination and feeling” are included in his analysis, too, as referring to something which “can be plotted on the line between story and symbol” — not the most perspicuous point in the discussion. Mythology, another word that often comes up in worldview discussions, is “a way of integrating praxis and symbol with story and, at least implicitly, with answers to the key questions.” The word “literature” refers to “a complex phenomenon in which, both explicitly and implicitly, stories are told, questions are raised and answered, praxis is exemplified, and symbols are either discussed directly or, more likely, alluded to in metaphor and other ways.”¹⁵

This relates culture explicitly to a certain aspect of the question of worldview and is amenable to the Biblical fact that there is a broad sense in which modern Christians may be said to share the same worldview with Noah or David, while at the same time giving due recognition to the very broad cultural differences between them and us. I agree with Wright’s assertion that worldviews are “like the foundation of a house: vital but invisible.” Societies look “through” rather than “at” them.¹⁶ But the most important insight that Wright adds to the discussion is the fact that worldviews come to expression most especially in stories.

In addition to the fact that it offers a refreshing and helpful perspective on what a worldview is, Wright’s emphasis on narrative rings Biblically true, for a great deal of the Bible’s teaching is occupied with historical matters given to us in extended narratives and specifically theological passages, like Paul’s arguments in Romans and Hebrews, are filled with references to history, whether as proof, illustration, or background. Biblical poetry, too, which provides the prayers and songs for the worship of God’s people, often rehearses history in order to praise God for His grace and glory and to provoke His people to repentance. The narratives of Biblical history, then, are woven into very fabric of revelation so that they do indeed form a central part of the Christian worldview. This means that the content of those narratives must be basic to our thought as well.

In particular, the Biblical story of the world offers insight into the history of culture. Historical questions about culture, which are not even possible for the non-Christian to ask because of his evolutionary view of the world, become possible for the Christian who takes Biblical history seriously. For example, we can ask as a historical question: Which came first, culture or worldview? An answer is possible because we have the story of the beginning. We know that about 6000 years ago, Adam was created and God taught Adam about the world, giving him and his descendants a historical task. Adam had a worldview soon after he was created and before he developed anything that we would usually call culture, although it would not be impossible to say that the Garden of Eden had its own culture from the beginning. The same kind of situation re-occurs after the flood. Noah and his family certainly have a worldview and God has given them a new covenant that both reaffirms their worldview and also revises it with new revelation. But when Noah steps out of the ark, most of what we normally think of as culture is simply not present. All the same, it might not be entirely wrong to speak of culture of some sort even at that point or shortly thereafter. However we may wish to view the culture of Adam in the Garden and Noah after the flood, it remains the case that Adam and Noah both had a worldview before they had the kind of culture that anthropologists think of as producing a

¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 124-25.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 125.

worldview, especially a worldview as sophisticated and well-developed as that of Adam and Noah. Biblical history shows us what modern anthropology cannot because the anthropologist's presuppositions, especially his evolutionary views of culture and world history, render impossible the kind of historical judgment we have suggested. If Kraft had taken the Biblical story more seriously, he would not have regarded culture as the source for worldview, but offered an analysis that moves in the opposite direction, for it was the worldviews of Adam and Noah that became the basis for the ancient civilizations. Ironically in both cases, the civilizations that grew out of their worldviews became apostate, Adam's worldview leading to the civilizations of Cain and the apostate Sethite civilization that was destroyed by the flood and Noah's worldview providing the foundation for the formation of the civilization of Babel and the dispersed nations that imitated Babel culture after the tower was judged.

As N. T. Wright explains, all groups of people have a story and are defined by their story of the world. This is what makes the Biblical story of the creation so important. When Christians find it hard to take seriously the story of Adam and Even and the fall, or when they are embarrassed about the stories of Joshua's conquest or Jesus' miracles, they are departing from the Christian worldview in a fundamental way, whether they know it or not. The story of the evolution of the world that is told in the often seen picture of a series of creatures, beginning with an ape and gradually becoming more manlike until the final figure is clearly *Homo sapiens*, is so familiar to us that the picture tells it all. A picture of Noah's ark or the cross or a picture of a cup of wine and bread are supposed to do the same thing for Christians. But in our day, the story of evolution is taken by so many to be the deep story, the way things really happened, that the Biblical story is not taken seriously. Whether or not evolution was precisely the problem with Kraft, we are forced to conclude that he is not reading the Bible story with attention.

Worldview and Covenant

N. T. Wright's helpful discussion of worldview suggests further lines of development. For what Wright has described as matters of worldview were, in ancient Israel, matters of covenant. The story of Israel was the story of God choosing her to be His covenant people, beginning with His calling Abraham out to follow Him. For ancient Israel, the questions and answers of life were all included within the basic truth of the covenant, which told them who they were, why they were where they were, what was wrong and what was the solution. The most basic symbols of her culture were defined in and prescribed by the covenant, though cultural change added and revised symbols like the temple, which Israel did not always have, the sacrifices, which during exile they could not offer, and secondary symbols like the city of Jerusalem, which endured cultural and physical changes that had a significant impact on its symbolic resonance. Praxis may be said to be the heart of the covenant since the covenant can be summed up in the ten words that commanded Israel in the way of life. The four things that worldviews do, then, were all done by the covenant word of the Lord.

What I want to add to Wright's approach is twofold. First, I want to say that man is a covenantal creature. To say, as Wright does, that all men have a worldview and all societies function in terms of a worldview is actually just to express the fact that the psychology of the covenant is universal, though the particular way in which any group of people express their covenantal nature varies. Because God has created us in His image and because He is a

covenantal God, human psychology and human society is, in its deepest as well as its most superficial and unconscious levels, inescapably covenantal.

A Biblical outline of the covenant suggests points similar to Wright's.¹⁷ 1) All men hold to some view of God, implicit or explicit. 2) All men have some story of the world that defines who they are, what is the meaning of their lives, collectively and individually. 3) All men live (and fail to live) in terms of some sort of a standard of right and wrong. 4) All men hold to some idea of success and failure, blessing and cursing, which is both individual and historical. 5) All men function in terms of some sort of vision for the future, however vague it may be to the individual. Relating the notion of worldview specifically to the covenant removes every trace of cultural relativity. Worldview is an aspect of what it means that man is created in God's image. This is the "deep structure" truth about who man is and it implies that in principle communication among men is possible since every individual has the same underlying covenantal psychology and all groups function in terms of a covenantal sociology.

The second point that I believe needs to be added to Wright's analysis is that in the law of God — and I have in mind here not simply the ten commandments, but the law as a whole, including what are called ceremonial as well as social and civil laws — that was given to ancient Israel, God set forth a cultural ideal. I do not mean — I hasten to add — that the culture of ancient Israel is something that all modern cultures are supposed to emulate, as if we should all wear our clothes as they did, avoid certain foods, or structure our calendar according to Jewish festivals. The time of the law was a time of immaturity, and the law was clearly intended to be temporary instruction for God's children as children. Now that we live in a more mature age in which the promise of the law (and the laws) is fulfilled in Christ, it would not only be silly, it would be blasphemous to turn back to what Paul calls the "weak and beggarly elements" (Gal. 4:9). What the law gave to ancient Israel was an ideal for the time, a social and cultural ideal for the people of God in their childhood.

Like any ideal for a child, it contains elements that are temporary and are quite naturally set aside when adulthood is achieved. Parents tell young children what to eat, when to get up and go to bed, what to wear, which room to sleep in, and so forth. So also, God decided all these things for the ancient Jews. When we become adults, we decide these things for ourselves. So it is also for the people of God in our day. God has not told us what to wear, what to eat, or where to live. We are not given instructions about the time or order of worship in the New Testament. Many things that were simply commanded in the old covenant are left to the discretion of the elders and congregation in the new covenant. However, the word discretion reminds us that though we leave behind the simple rules of childhood, it is presumed that we first learned something from those rules. The instructions that our parents gave us, assuming it was basically wise and good, will have much in it that will still apply to us in our adulthood, even if it does not apply in the same simple and direct way that it did in our childhood. So it is, I believe, with the law of God.

To take a simple and clear example of what I mean, consider how the law directed Israel to harvest their fields. They were instructed by God to leave behind fruit for the gleaners and to not harvest at all the corners of their fields. Now, unless we live in an agricultural society, these laws would be very difficult to directly implement in any meaningful way, even if we tried diligently to practice them. But there is something we ought to learn about what we regard as

¹⁷ There is more than one way to outline the Biblical covenant. I am following a simplified version of the outline suggested by Ray Sutton, *That You May Prosper* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1987).

our own property. We ought to learn also about a concern for the poor. There are things we might learn about how to help poor people, too. The law does not have to be kept as statutory regulation to be a real help to us, to teach us wisdom and give us insight into life. In the same way that our parent's instruction is still relevant for us, though it is not a rule that we live by, the word of God to ancient Israel set forth a cultural ideal that was fitted to those people at that time, but which still offers wisdom and instruction for all Christians in all times and places.

This does not imply that all Christian societies will have exactly the same culture any more than the fact that we are all created in God's image implies that we will all have the same personality. Individuals have gifts and so do groups of people. Individuals have weaknesses and I believe, though it is not considered proper to say so, that groups of people do also. It is true, according to Paul, that Cretans are always liars, evil beasts and lazy gluttons. But Paul did not rule them out of the kingdom. Instead, he told Titus to recognize their cultural weaknesses and to rebuke them severely so that they might overcome their sins and be sound in the faith.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have offered criticism of Charles Kraft and a short introduction to N. T. Wright in order to consider the Biblical idea of worldview and its relation to culture. I have tried to show that Kraft's ideas about culture, which Carl F. H. Henry rightly criticizes as relativistic, go astray in part because Kraft regards worldview as a cultural product, and therefore relative to society. If we follow N. T. Wright's analysis of worldview and add to it a covenantal perspective on worldview, we are led in a very different direction. Worldview is basically a covenantal perspective because all men have covenantal psychology and all societies are governed by covenantal conditions.

These conclusions are important for missionaries in particular. If missionaries are going to be successful in preaching the Gospel in foreign nations, one of the most basic priorities is to offer a new story of the world. The Gospel is not a mere philosophy or a set of rules. It is first of all a story of what God has done, is doing and will do. To really tell the story of Christ, we must begin with the story of creation. The story of the world and of God's saving work in His people is the foundation for building a new Christian culture. There is a Christian worldview that all Christians can and should hold in common. There are also cultural particulars that will be different because we all have different histories. We will apply the Christian worldview in different ways and expound it with different emphases. But if we follow the Bible, Christians in modern Africa or Asia will recognize their affinity with the ancient Hebrews, with the North African Augustine and the French John Calvin. Christians of all ages and places form one community because they share one faith, one baptism, and one Spirit. It is into that unity of fellowship that Christian missionaries and pastors seek to lead their congregations.