

Vanhoozer, Kevin, Charles Anderson, Michael Sleasman, eds. *Everyday Theology: How to Read Cultural Texts and Interpret Trends*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2007.

Everyday Theology poses the question, “How do we interpret culture?” Seminary students and pastors labor to understand how to read Biblical texts. Here, however, the authors want to exegete culture. In short, all people live out an implied theology; that is, our lives convey our sense of how the world is and how it should be. Our actions and words make claims about God, truth, and meaning. If we do not know how to “read” the culture, it is possible that our Biblical exposition will remain abstract and irrelevant to our hearers. Therefore, the authors attempt to formulate and demonstrate a potential method for interpreting cultural trends and “signs”. The Introduction and Postscript offer the most explicit insights into methodology and rationale. For this reason, they also serve as the most important chapters in the text. The rest of the book includes various examples of cultural exegesis.¹ Kevin Vanhoozer, Charles Anderson, and Michael Sleasman edited this anthology. It was published by Baker in 2007 (ISBN # 0801031672).

Chapter 1 is an apologetic for “cultural interpretation”. Vanhoozer begins by explaining the concept of “culture”. Put simply, “culture refers to everything that humans do voluntarily as opposed to involuntarily” (21). Culture provides a context by which observers can distinguish themes. As we pay attention to patterns, parts, and wholes of society, we learn its symbols, language, practices, and systems (22-24). In short, he suggests, “culture is made up of ‘works’ and ‘worlds’ of meaning” (26). Culture is a work because it represents the creative expression of human choice and labor. It does not arise naturally from particles and forces. Culture is a world in that it influences and informs that way we see our existence. “It is a lived worldview” (26). Culture makes social relationships possible. No individual is sovereign over culture because culture is an expression of the collective mind and heart. Accordingly, culture “trains us...honing our sense of what is true, good, and beautiful” (31). If we are to communicate the gospel, we must understand the cultures that have shaped us and into which we speak.

Vanhoozer introduces the idea of “cultural texts”, those events or objects in culture that reveal cultural meaning. They “serve as the lens through which we view everything else and as the compass that orients us” (36). In the middle portion of the book, a few sample cultural texts are examined, such as movies, music, and architecture. No cultural text is exhaustive; collectively, we can view diverse texts and perceive the culture’s dominant story or metanarrative. By this, we mean how social authority is determined and what is the hope that drives people (143-148). Therefore, Vanhoozer asserts cultural exegesis will be influenced by our own theological presuppositions. In the end, the book will suggest we find ways to intersect the Biblical story with the cultural narrative (240-242). He grounds his analysis on four biblical doctrines: the incarnation, general revelation, common grace, and the imago Dei (41-43).

Vanhoozer warns us that all texts—especially cultural texts—have levels of meaning. No particular vantage point or social science can explain all aspects of an event, trend or phenomenon. We must ask different kinds of questions. For example, who most benefits from this cultural text? Where did it originate? What or who does it affect? What kind of a future does

¹ This is the term used to describe the series from which this book comes.

it point to? What does it ignore? What promises does it make (48-51)? Cultures often speak in metaphors (28, 52). How we frame our values and descriptions of the world can profoundly direct our futures (52).

“To be a cultural agent—a person able to make his or her own mark on culture rather than simply submit to cultural programming—one needs to be culturally literate and a critical thinker” (55). Therefore, in the last chapter, Charles Anderson and Michael Sleasman offer some practical steps for creatively and critically implementing cultural exegesis. This first requires that we be aware of cultural trends and texts (230). This demands our paying attention and asking questions. It is imperative that we first listen to what a cultural text or trend is “saying” before making judgments (234). Theologically speaking, we should look for “signs of creation and the fall” (234, 240-241). In many texts, there is some quality reflections of creation’s original goodness. On the other hand, we should not be surprised to see misuse and evil present as well. The world is full of corrupted goods. Second, we should strive to understand what all the text means and how it relates to other things. We should discover what influences it. What other concepts or dynamics are related to it? Is there a worldview that emerges? Third, we should go to Scripture. As the authors point out, every cultural phenomenon will not be in the Bible; however, underlying values and topics most certainly will be (238). In the process, the writers expect that we will be able to more clearly compare and contrast the Biblical narrative with the story told by the cultural context. The cultural interpreter cannot expect to become an expert on the topic; however, he or she does hope to become conversant with the subject matter, from diverse perspectives. This is why Vanhoozer asserts that cultural exegesis must be done in community (55).

The rest of *Everyday Theology* offers numerous examples of cultural texts and trends by which to test this methodology. Here, I will simply survey some of the more interesting applications and conclusions. Each of the contributors begin by summarizing their subject matter, making observations, posing questions, and hypothesizing possible meanings. Only then do the authors construct a biblical theology about their topic *and* in response to it. Admirably, most of the articles do not stop at criticizing some alleged cultural vice; rather, they seek to hear the truth and legitimate need represented in the cultural exchange. For example, when Darren Sarisky discusses rap artist Eminem, he bravely but correctly concludes, “Some Christian groups, however, focus so narrowly on what offends them that they fail to comprehend the mentality of the marginalized—the very people they are especially obligated to reach” (93).

The authors are even handed. They are neither defensive nor overly accommodating to the message learned by the various texts. Lawson, Sleasman, and Anderson do not hesitate to name specific areas that Christians and non-Christian alike struggle to master—whether the desire for sex, information, health, or convenience (71-75). David Thompson questions the basis for the United Nation’s document “The Declaration of Human Rights” (106-113). In so doing, he does not hence “throw out” the importance of love and mutual respect. Rather, his goal is subtler. He exposes the flaw in its circular logic. The U.N. document has no absolute basis. Thompson goes on to show that only the gospel can found such universal love. It is not clear what we will discover when we examine such texts. Sometimes, the results of our exegesis are straightforward, but in this case, his conclusions challenged the very assumptions of the text.

Cultural “authors” are not always aware of what they are saying. For example, Williams’ survey on megachurch architecture (Ch. 5) shows how the broader cultural values can unknowingly shape our ministries. One of the fruits of cultural interpretation, applied even to the church itself, is an increased intentionality. Everything we do communicates something. We should grow increasingly cognizant of the ways that cultures display meanings.

An excellent starting place for cultural exegesis is that which causes anxiety or takes up our energies. For example, a few writers explore the topics of busyness, blogging, weddings, and death. The analysis of busyness was most profound to this reader, no doubt because others and I suffer from its effects. Anderson goes beyond mere time management techniques and instead find that excessive choices, psychological time, and boundaries are as much to blame as the raw usage of seconds and minutes (158-159). What we are busy with exposes our idols. At the heart of busyness is the matter of one’s identity. We must view time and tasks as diagnostics of our practical theology. “Being grounded in the gospel means that relationships—with God, others, and creation—precede activity” (165). Are we aware of the sovereignty and grace of God in our busyness? In blogging, we hear the cry of many who long for intimacy yet are inept at personally relating face to face. The Internet masks feeling of inadequacy and fear so that people are bolder in private than in public. In this trend, cultural exegesis informs the Christian leader of his neighbors’ needs and wants. Only then can we aptly apply biblical truth in relevant ways.

Everyday Theology helps us become students of the world and the word. We cannot blindly assert applications from Scripture ignorant of the questions and concerns of our hearers. As we exegete the surrounding culture, we are reminded not to confuse ancient near eastern cultures with our own. Each setting has its unique features. On the other hand, the authors consistently show us how universal is the grand narrative of Scripture. In every cultural text or trend, we will inevitably see some mark of creation’s goodness or the fall’s corruption. There is nothing new “under the sun”. The book helps us realize that there is overlap in reading Scripture and interpreting culture. This should encourage both layman and pastor alike. The authors set a good example by consistently applying the methodological principles put forth in the Introduction and Conclusion. As a result, we can be assured *some* fruit from our labor; yet, the various articles remind us not to prejudge our results. At times, the culture may (rightly) judge *us!* *Everyday Theology* presses us to be more intentional in our practice and our thinking. Everything we do preaches some message. We will either put forth the gospel or else some false alternative. The book shows the reader that we too are participants and products of culture. This should humble us and give us hope. We can be agents of change even as we are being changed.