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Book Review: Introducing Cultural Anthropology: A Christian Perspective by Brian M. Howell and Jenell Williams Paris

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Sills and Stone: Book Review: Introducing Cultural Anthropology: A Christian Perspective
international missionaries and missional church folk. Missional church models and their monoregional focus have dramatically affected international missionaries. People constantly tell us that they will no longer support us as missionaries because they are focused on local projects. International missionaries do not wish to deny domestic ministry, but many missional church folk often forget the value of international ministry.

Right Here, Right Now is worth the purchase if 1) you have never read other missional books; 2) you want to purge the stack of other missional books and summarize them into one folksy volume; or 3) if you desire to give it as a gift to someone who has not read a missional church book. Ford does a good job telling the story and weaving in humor with the severity of what it means to be a disciple. Hirsch is academic but explains his theories in such simple ways that he loses all the pretensions of most academics—seminary graduates take note. Hirsch and Ford motivate their readers to rise up like Samson, to break down the walls of institutions, throw off the shackles of risk aversion and social restraint, and enter the kingdom of God. Hirsch and Ford's book is about the freedom to become a disciple; it is about everyday people freed to be missional in everyday life.

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Brian M. Howell and Jenell Williams Paris, *Introducing Cultural Anthropology: A Christian Perspective*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011. 273 pp., \$29.99.

Reviewed by M. David Sills, D.Miss., Ph.D., A.P. and Faye Stone, Professor of Christian Missions, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

Brian M. Howell holds a Ph.D. in Socio-Cultural Anthropology from Washington University and is Associate Professor of Anthropology at Wheaton College. Howell's stated anthropological interests are centered in global Christianity, particularly Filipino Protestantism, as well as race relations in the U.S. (<http://www.wheaton.edu/Socio/faculty/howell.html>). Howell has previously published *Christianity in Local Context: Southern Baptists in the Philippines* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008). Jenell Williams Paris holds a Ph.D. in Cultural Anthropology from American University and is Professor of Anthropology and Sociology at Messiah College. Paris' areas of interest include "urban anthropology, race, gender, and sexuality" (viii). Paris' previous books include *Birth Control for Christians* (Baker Books, 2003) and *Urban Disciples* (co-author, Judson Press, 2000).

Howell and Paris begin *Introducing Cultural Anthropology* with a preface that contains preparatory content that includes an introduction to the authors,

Great Commission Research Journal, Vol. 3, Iss. 1 [2022], Art. 11 discusses to whom and how the text should be used, and articulates the thesis of the book. They begin with the story of how the book came to be, pointing back to a colleague's question concerning teaching culture to a French class (vii). It was from this question that *Introducing Cultural Anthropology* was initially conceived. Howell states the thesis of what has ultimately become his and Paris' work in this context—recognizing the need for a book “that would explain the culture concept in both academic and Christian terms, without assuming the reader has a professional anthropologist's training for sorting through theoretical and technical issues” (vii). Howell further states, “There was a need for a textbook that presented anthropology as a discipline in its own right and not only as a tool to support foreign missions or other explicitly cross-cultural work” (viii). The collective understanding of these two statements establishes the premise and purpose of *Introducing Cultural Anthropology*.

Introducing Cultural Anthropology communicates a comprehensive introduction to topics central to the discipline of cultural anthropology. The discussions of the pertinent theories, fields, concepts, and anthropological processes covered are thorough and certainly reflect anthropology as a discipline. Each chapter includes reference to how the particular topic applies to the Christian worldview as well as a closing devotional that ties topically to the chapter content. Although not an extensive evaluation of any one aspect of cultural anthropology, it serves as a well-organized introductory text.

In addition to a broad introductory perspective on cultural anthropology, *Introducing Cultural Anthropology* is also very well structured. The content is presented in a logical progression and includes a helpful outline at the beginning of each chapter. The structure of the text facilitates the authors' intent of presenting a focus on the discipline of anthropology while recognizing the tie to Christianity.

Introduction to Cultural Anthropology's core strength is the successful completion of the authors' thesis. There is a definite emphasis on anthropological foundations and introductory theories. Howell and Paris certainly achieved their goal of creating a strong anthropological text that does not read as anthropology in the light of missiological implications. A second strength of the text is the aforementioned organization of the text coupled with the consistent level of the content from Howell and Paris. While often overlooked or not considered, the consistency of writing across varied subjects and theories to a single level of reader is crucial.

While it seems clear that the authors have achieved their intent by producing an introductory cultural anthropology textbook that is well organized and comprehensive, the text does have three significant weaknesses. First, while

Sills and Stone; Book Review: *Introducing Cultural Anthropology: A Christian Perspective* intentional in purpose, the content throughout the text is a descriptive treatment of anthropology with limited discussion of the missiological implications. Although each chapter does include a superficial treatment of the Christian response to the issue addressed and the topics include direct reference to various biblical texts, it fails to address the necessary complex examination of how anthropology intersects with truth as one would expect from a text subtitled, “A Christian Perspective.” This is especially true for the targeted reader who has not been trained in such matters. Overall, the text focuses on describing aspects of cultural anthropology rather than guiding the student through an understanding of how to study culture in the light of the biblical text. The biblically responsible student of cultural anthropology must understand that Scripture informs culture; culture does not inform Scripture. *Introducing Cultural Anthropology* fails to reflect consistently that all aspects of every culture are first and foremost subject to the authority of biblical teaching.

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A second limitation of *Introducing Cultural Anthropology* relates to the treatment of some key areas of faith and practice, such as gender, sexuality, family, and the role of culture. Among these issues, the treatment of gender is perhaps most problematic, with a less than clear articulation and affirmation of the purpose of God in gender distinctions (88–92). Additionally, the treatment of gender roles, while not overtly egalitarian, certainly falls short of that which would be acceptable for those who hold to the complementarian perspective, as do I and the institution for which I teach (89, 103). Ultimately, while Howell and Paris briefly acknowledge the role of the image of God in the creation of gender (90), they fail to apply that reality to the way they understand both our Western Christian culture as well as other cultures around the world and seem to allow for biblically aberrant cultural expressions of gender manifestations as legitimate.

The third limitation of *Introducing Cultural Anthropology* is actually a flaw of omission. Several contemporary topics and issues are not addressed that are virtually unavoidable for those engaging other cultures of the world. For instance, the burgeoning awareness of the challenge of oral cultures and their unique worldviews, ethno-cognition, and the advances made in this area of cultural research are never addressed in the text. With 70% of the world’s population living outside of the literate world, an understanding of those who are illiterate or preliterate is central to understanding anthropology today. The absence of this topic reflects the weakness that the text addresses historical anthropology topics but fails to incorporate some key contemporary topics such as systems for understanding culture types. Other topics are mentioned only in passing that

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require thorough treatment if the beginning student is to understand and
effectively engage the world's cultures; worldview identification and understanding,
critical contextualization, and animism and pervasive syncretism are a few of
these.

Introducing Cultural Anthropology does in fact introduce the discipline of
cultural anthropology to the reader. Those who study this text will certainly have a
basic knowledge of cultural anthropology and the introductory theories, fields, and
concepts most central to its study. However, they will not have an understanding of
how to rightly apply the Word of God within various cultural constructs,
understanding and discerning the instances in which biblical absolutes supersede
cultural norms. It is this task of critical contextualization that most requires an
understanding of cultural anthropology. *Introducing Cultural Anthropology* is a
well-written and helpful new tool for introducing the discipline of cultural
anthropology in a Christian classroom but will need to be supplemented by other
works, teaching, and guidance to find practical application in missions contexts.

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Edward H. Hammett, *Spiritual Leadership in a Secular Age: Building Bridges Instead of
Barriers*. Chalice, 2005, xv + 188 pp., \$19.99.

Reviewed by Lloyd W. Rodgers, Ph.D., Director, International Centre for Excellence in
Leadership, International Mission Board

Helping local church leadership discover God's agenda as they seek practical
ways to engage a secular, postmodern culture is the ministry calling of Edward
Hammett. He is a certified Christian coach (PCC), consultant, and author of
numerous books and articles on spiritual formation, outreach, and Christian
leadership. As part of the Columbia Partnership Leadership Series, *Spiritual
Leadership in a Secular Age* came out of a conversation between the author and an
unchurched friend who asked him honestly why churches "work so hard building
barriers to keep me out rather than bridges to let me in" (80). Describing those
bridges—and naming the barriers—is the purpose of this book.

Although the book is divided into four sections, the first three contain the
primary themes. In the first section, "Spiritual Leadership *in* the Church"
(emphasis in original), Hammett asks a pivotal question of church leaders: Does
your church exist solely to serve its gathered membership, or does it have a vision
for building bridges to engage those who live outside the church culture? Faced
with the reality of a rapidly evolving U.S. cultural landscape, as the gap between