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Book Review: Cultural Intelligence: Living for God in a Diverse, Pluralistic World by Darrell Bock

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Book Review

Cultural intelligence: Living for God in a Diverse, Pluralistic World

By Darrell Bock

Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2020

128 pages

USD \$19.99, Paperback

Reviewed by Kenneth Nehrbass. Kenneth Nehrbass, Ph.D., is an anthropology and translation consultant with the Summer Institute of Linguistics and is the Director of Special Projects at California Baptist University.

Cultural Intelligence is a short, popular-level text about sharing the Christian faith in an increasingly secular world. Despite the title's resemblance to the theories of cultural intelligence (CQ), the text does not interact with the CQ model that has been popularized in missiology. However, the text does cover a question that is core to missiology: How can we share the good news with the wider culture? By "culture" Bock has in mind the majority culture found within the USA, which is becoming increasingly at odds with the Christian subculture. In fact, Bock suggests that (Western?) culture (he does not explicitly name *which* culture) is closer to the paganism of the Roman empire than to the Christianity of Western Europe in previous centuries: Our neighbors may not believe in truth, and may not have absolute moral standards.

Bock explains that to be culturally intelligent in this glocalized, secular context means understanding the values, customs and social institutions of agnostics and atheists. And to challenge those values and customs, we must be mindful of the ways we engage secular folks in conversations about religious ideas. He draws on some key scriptures that should inform

such conversations. For example, his exegesis of Ephesians 6:10-18 reminds us that we are engaged in a spiritual battle. And Bock urges us to read off of 1 Peter 3:13-18, rather than stopping at verse 15 (be ready with a defense). We must *also* read the part about having gentleness and respect.

A recurring thesis in the book is that the gospel is both an invitation and a challenge (38). This invitation/challenge motif is an “enormous tension” (97) throughout the New Testament and for anyone who wants to be salt and light: On the one hand, the gospel is good news; on the other hand, the evangelist must share the bad news of how our culture has rebelled, so people will see why the good news is, in fact, good. To develop this invitation/challenge concept, Bock juxtaposes Paul’s *theology* of evangelism in Romans 1 (e.g. “all are without excuse”) to his *methodology* of evangelism in Acts 17 (e.g. Paul referred to the Athenians’ own cultural texts, and offered them hope) (52).

The book draws on communication theory to show how our messages are multi-layered. Bock refers to the triphonic (three-sound) nature of communication (54): 1) the *content* (Bock refers to this as the “facts”); 2) the *filters* (our emotions and perceptions); and 3) our *identity* (this can include our goals for communication, and the relationship between the conversation partners). Bock’s advice is that we use our awareness of these three layers to become better listeners. Our goal should be to understand, not just to win an argument.

The text contains some heuristic devices: One scale helps the reader to determine the level of conviction he or she holds regarding a particular issue. Another checklist helps the reader determine the extent to which an issue matters in the eternal scope of things. These tools can help evangelists “major on the majors” (this is not Bock’s term).

To develop a theology of cultural engagement, Bock spends some time on the relationship between the Creation Mandate and the Great Commission. He exhorts us that “salvation is about more than the cross” (79). Discipleship involves learning how to carry out the creation mandate in ways that honor God and others, so we can “manage our world and its relationships well” (82).

Toward the end, Bock lays out a suggested course-correction for the way the church handles the ministry of proclamation. He affirms that (evangelical) churches are typically good at reading the “Bible to life” (105). That is, they exegete a passage and apply it to a situation. But Bock suggests that we should become more skilled at reading “life to the Bible” (106). This is more challenging, because it requires that we become aware of contemporary trends in the culture, and show, with grace and hope, what the Bible has to say about those issues. But Bock warns that we

should stop focusing on a few pet social and theological issues which make the church seem irrelevant to so many people. Instead, our message must have many intersections with the daily lives of secular people, as Abraham Kuyper tried to do (96). Specific examples of such cultural issues include racial identity, wealth, work, guns, world religions, and immigration. Bock supplies some scriptural passages for examining each of these issues.

Because of its brevity, *Cultural Intelligence* does not delve into rich examples of how secular people have come to faith through the methods that Bock suggests. But the book supplies ample scriptural support (and cultural insight) for the approaches that are developed throughout the text.