

The Cultural Perspective – Doing Ministry as an Alien (in foreign worlds)

I. Introduction: Most of us know how uncomfortable it is to be without a translator among people who speak a language we cannot understand. In fact, nearly all of us avoid that situation and that uncomfortable feeling just like the people judged at Babel...

II. Key Article: ***A Church in Every People*** by Donald McGavran

III. Key Bible Texts:

A. Genesis 11:1-9 (The Tower of Babel). Linguistic Confusion: The Necessary Challenge.

Notes:

B. Acts 15 (The Jerusalem Counsel). God Forbids Cultural Burdens (like circumcision and the ceremonial law) for New Believers.

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C. 1 Corinthians 9:19-23 (All Things to All Men). The Missionary Must Flex Culturally, Not His Converts.

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D. 1 Corinthians 8:1-13 (Meats, Idols, and Christian Liberties). As Servants of God, We Check our Personal Liberties at the Door of the Church (the stronger needs give in to avoid offenses with the weak and thus advance of the gospel).

Notes:

IV. Key Concepts

A. Worldview:

1. Worldview is a dynamic collective cultural system of beliefs, feelings, and values held by a people. It is their way of understanding and relating to the realities they see around them. It is the lens through which they see their world.
2. Missionaries must have at least a working knowledge of a people's worldview if they ever hope to avoid even basic misunderstandings and prejudices in their witness. They also need to study it so that the crucial gospel message and resulting faith can be contextualized not just in external religious forms, but in the people's hearts and souls that Christ longs to save (James 5:20).

B. The Truth, Allegiance, and Power Encounters involved in the Conversion Process:

1. The **truth** encounter deals with *understanding*. Teaching truth is the means of enriching the understanding of the hearers to the point of being able to make decisions about it. It also prepares the hearers to interpret properly the other two encounters.
2. The **allegiance** encounter deals with *relationship*. Via the witness of the missionary and truth being proclaimed the lost are lead into obedience to Christ. There is a surrendering of one's will to the will of God and thus an intimate relationship begins and a new godly character begins to emerge (fruit of the spirit).
3. The **power** encounter deals with *freedom*. Because Satan by nature oppresses and enslaves people spiritually and otherwise, a conflict is introduced when a relationship with Christ begins. The Lord begins to heal, illuminate, and free the individual, driving out the enemies hurts, lies and strongholds. Through this spiritual warfare the believer learns to trust God more and more.

C. "Supracultural" and "Dynamic Equivalence":

1. Truly the gospel is "supra-cultural", or relevant to every culture and people of the world. The fact that its essence is understandable and applicable universally was God's intention, obviously, in order to save some from every tribe, language, people, and nation. And that is why he called it a "seed" in the kingdom parables of Matthew 13. He did not call it a grown plant or tree that would be transplanted from people to people, but rather a simple seed that would be able to grow and develop wherever the soil could receive it. A transplanted tree in foreign soil, aside from being difficult to transport, has no guarantee of being able to thrive in strange conditions. A seed is highly portable and has a much better chance of adapting itself to those same conditions while growing so that the final tree can be indigenous to that environment. The DNA (essence) remains the same, but the tree's visible, external characteristics will be somewhat different as compared to the results of the same seed planted in other soils.
2. This shared spiritual DNA creates "dynamic equivalence" churches that appear differently in some external forms like worship styles and teaching applications, but remain completely Biblical at the invisible level of the people's world view.
3. To put it another way, the simple gospel that our loving Creator sent his son Jesus as a perfect sacrifice to forgive our sins and reconcile us eternally to our Heavenly Father is the same message being planted and bearing fruit around the world. Yet the mature result of it, the church, within different communities, takes on unique and precious local expression and characteristics.

D. Cross-cultural Communication:

1. The same analogy used above also helps us understand the importance of our means of communicating the gospel cross-culturally. Let's compare again a seed to a transplanted plant. This time we will contrast effective and flawed gospel communication.
2. Effective communication of the gospel is seed planting that transfers Biblical truth while keeping it simple, pure and relatable. This is accomplished by using local language, examples and illustrations, esteeming all aspects of local culture that don't contradict scripture, and if possible by discipling locals themselves to do the teaching.
3. Jesus so effectively planted the gospel seed among some Jews that they thought all others peoples had to become Jews to share it at first (Acts 15). The gospel was considered Jewish. Paul also did an effective job among those of the Greek culture throughout the Roman Empire. His work was thought to have "turned the world upside down" (Acts 17:6) and those he touched continued to function within their same cultural context.
4. Transplanting a plant is flawed communication that takes an entire religious system with all the details pre-packaged for immediate and legalistic use. Once grown, a plant no longer adapts well and a pre-packaged gospel complete with traditions cannot be well understood. Such flawed approaches include teaching with an attitude of ethnocentrism and prejudice, introducing foreign traditions like western guitars and plastic communion cups, using foreign illustrations in preaching, making foreign applications, and rejecting all local beliefs and customs as pagan.
5. An example of this is the form of evangelism that the Pharisees practiced. Jesus condemned their evangelism which focused more on traditions that substance and essence (Matthew 23:13-36 Mark 7:6-15).

E. Contextualization: Adapting a message to the culture of another people.

F. Syncretism: Adopting foreign religious practices without a corresponding change in deep-level beliefs.

1. Syncretism is not failed communication, but partial communication. With syncretism, it is usually the external religious behavior that is most easily transferred to a different culture.
2. This partial and superficial reception (not reaching their world view or only being mixed with their existing worldview) can be seen in the Mayan people during the Spanish conquest of Guatemala. The Mayan natives were forced to work in the construction of a number of cathedrals, particularly in Antigua. They were already being forced to worship in the Roman Catholic way as the Spanish army and their guns had already demonstrated their effectiveness at dealing with non-compliant natives. Embittered by the conquest and religious coercion, the workers would secretly embed their idols in the walls of these large churches and then, once the buildings were completed, pay their homage to their own deities they knew were just behind the different statues of Mary, Peter, and Paul. Externally they were conforming to catholic worship ceremony, but in their heart they were still honoring the same pagan gods they always had.

G. Ethnocentrism: Judging other cultures by the values and assumptions of one's own culture.

H. What can missionaries do to sensitively overcome the impression that the gospel is **alien** or **threatening**?

1. Study and understand the culture as thoroughly as possible.
2. Pray for spiritual discernment.

3. Draw out the locals' thoughts about a given passage with questions and let them do most of the talking.
 4. Encourage native expressions of spiritual truth.
 5. Allow local leaders (even provisional ones) to make the decisions about church practices.
 6. Don't rush into traditions. Let them develop as the people see need for them.
 7. Teach other teachers basic principles and let them make their own applications.
 8. Discourage obviously western or non-local traditions.
- I. Incarnational Ministry:
1. Christ of course is the master and model missionary who spanned the greatest cultural distance (heaven to earth) to humbly identify with an oppressed and lost humanity (John 1:14) and extend them salvation (Luke 19:10). Jesus would tell his disciples repeatedly to "follow me" (Matthew 4:19, 8:22; 9:9; 16:24; 19:21; John 10:27; 12:26; 21:19) so that they would learn and follow His example. Jesus would also explain simply to them that "As the Father has sent Me, I also send you" (John 20:21) implying our mission would be of the same *purpose* as well as *manner*.
 2. Jesus' incarnation then serves as our primary model for this mission of communicating the Gospel to the world. We see in Philippians 2:1-8 that this happens in two ways.
 - a. **Renunciation.** Philippians 2 says that Christ "emptied himself" (v. 7). There are at least three ways that Christ did this.
 - i. First, He renounced status. Jesus, who was the greatest in the kingdom, chose to become the servant of all (Mark 10:44). He would even go so far as to take upon himself the slave duty of foot washing (John 13:2-17). So too as missionaries we should not be domineering but supportive. We should not seek a high place of authority, but rather work to elevate local believers to leadership in the church from the start.
 - ii. Second, He renounced independence. Jesus chose to participate in community and depend upon others. He lived in others' homes, ate others food, and paid taxes with others money. He borrowed boats, donkeys, meeting places, and even a tomb. He also formed a team of Apostles upon whom he would rely to begin the discipling of the nations. So too as missionaries we need to work with the communities we serve in, depend upon others, and not be "lone rangers".
 - iii. Thirdly, He renounced immunity. As a man he was not immune to temptation, sadness, physical limits, needs, and pain. So too as missionaries we need to be prepared to live in environments without special rights where we may even be despised and discriminated against (John 15:18-20).
 - b. **Identification.**
 - i. Our Philippians passage also says that by becoming a man, He "humbled himself" (v. 8). Hebrews shows us that he became "flesh and blood" (2:14) like us, "was in all points tempted like as we are" (4:15), and "learned obedience by the things which he suffered" (5:8). So, Jesus completely identified himself with humanity in general, and poor Galilean Jews in particular. He learned their language, ate their food, followed their customs, attended their festivals, walked their dusty trails, and hung out with them.
 - ii. So too as missionaries, we have the opportunity to flex and adapt ourselves in order to fit in as much as we can into the society we serve. Will we stand out like a sore thumb,

or be welcomed as participating, productive members of our hosts' families, customs, and institutions? Though we will never lose our true identity, we can "seek to humbly empty [ourselves] of all but [our] personal authenticity" (Perspectives Reader p. 494 -- from the Lausanne Covenant, para. 10).

J. Viable Roles for Adopting a New Culture:

1. The first viable role a missionary can adopt is that of the **learner**. This is the scene of the schoolroom. Every culture has forms of education and it is always the novice that learns and the expert that teaches. As newcomers we are novices to their culture and should not deny the obvious. As we submit to their teaching, we endear ourselves to the people by esteeming them as our teachers and honoring their knowledge of their world. We need to be careful not to take the role of a teacher of doctrine at this point.
2. The second viable role a missionary can adopt is that of a **trader**. This is the scene of the marketplace. We can trade goods as a tentmaker, experiences as a fellow human being, and insights into life in general as long as we are willing to receive reciprocally. As outsiders we can share about our experience there that may be very interesting to our new friends. We need to be careful not to take the role of a seller of our religion at this point.
3. The third viable role a missionary can adopt is that of a **story teller**. This is the scene of the court, whether formal or informal. Once we have gained some trust and friendship, we can move on to telling the stories of scripture that can be "judged" by our hearers. This is not preaching. As we are probably still learning language, we will be limited to what we can say and need to keep things simple. We are also seeking to enrich people lives with the truths that will eventually set them free. We need to be careful not to take the role of an accuser of the culture at this point.

K. Bonding:

1. Basically, missionary bonding parallels that of infant bonding. Upon first contact, the success of the relationship depends upon the quick establishment of a sense of belonging. A missionary needs to connect with his or her community by connecting, ideally, with a particular respected family in that community. These principles are also based upon Jesus' incarnation.
2. When a missionary moves quickly to become a "belonger" or "insider" by immediately beginning language learning, living with and relating openly with the people, practicing local customs, etc., the emotional bond become mutual.
3. Though this will be a shock be immersed so quickly, like jumping into a cold lake, it is the quickest way to get over that shock and accustomed to the new environment. The whole process of incarnation is aided and sped along as well. This way the ministry of love, acceptance and understanding will aid future instruction of gospel truth. Dragging out the process only leads to a more difficult transition and often shortened missionary career.
4. Having lived in three different cultures and having learned one foreign language fluently and parts of two others, I can personally testify that the Brewsters are spot on.

L. Bi-cultural Bridge:

1. A "bi-cultural bridge" is the essential relationship between national leader and missionary over which can travel the gospel message. It is practically a third, mixed and limited culture that may also be temporary until a contextualized church begins reproducing itself. This bridge is unique in that it blends features from both cultures into a new, shared, sub-culture. Since no one can completely "go native" this is a necessary reality. Much of message and ministry is worked out in this relationship making the proclamation of Biblical truth to the unreached culture hopefully more effective.

2. The missionaries' roles within and identification with the culture are crucial to the bridge's success. Roles with the community need to be local and believable. Roles with the church need to reflect servanthood, and not empire-building. Identification depends on healthy levels of respect and relationships that share (are reciprocal).
3. I have been blessed to participate in at least four such bridges without even realizing exactly what was happening or what it was called. It is true that there is a risk that the national can become alienated from his home culture by overexposure to aspects of the missionary's culture. At times entire institutions are formed around this third mixed culture (like missionary schools and formal boarding Bible institutes) that do not always contribute to cause or advance the goal of a people movement.

M. Primary character trait that will make us effective cross-cultural communicators:

1. The key word and trait that would sum up the teaching of Philippians 2:1-8, the voluminous comments in the Perspective's reader about this passage, and my personal experience, would be **humility**.
2. Only when the Lord works in us humility (and no process works more of this into us than cross-cultural ministry) can we be truly and eternally effective at his great commission. The Lord had a lot of work to do with each of his apostles before they could be effective too (but that's another very long Bible study).

N. Basic Societal Social Structures and the Communication of the Gospel:

1. Tribal: These societies are ruled by an oligarchy. Since village elders make decisions together via long deliberations, carefully weighing the consequences for all of their people on whom they depend for survival, these same elders are key to birthing a people movement. The communication is two way between elders and families or clans, so decisions made are largely by consensus. Winning the trust of the elders and sharing the gospel message with them can result in major group conversions.
2. Peasant: These societies are also ruled by an oligarchy, but the communication with the ruled is not two-way. Peasant societies all have some form of caste system whether social, cultural, or economic. All subordinate groups, regardless of their level take their cues from the dominant class. Communication flows from the oligarchy to each individual caste but does not flow between castes. The casts do not usually respect well the dominant group as it is usually repressive. The gospel spreads therefore best when it is planted within each caste group where it can spread freely amongst peers. Each caste needs its own people movement.
3. Urban: This social structure is very individualistic, and any structures are highly voluntary. Webs of people and their "people" form networks that the gospel can flow down. There is a rapid flow of communication, though that communication is not necessarily deep. There is no clear-cut strategy for evangelizing in urban environments but building churches has proved difficult and distracting to the spiritual goal. Kinship ties remain important to people. Personally, I have observed the effectiveness of systems of cell groups and house churches in such environments that can grow with almost no economic investment. Mass media, particularly radio, has been effective when heart languages can be incorporated.

V. Key Questions:

- A. What expectations do we have about foreigners or people from cultures and languages other than our own?
- B. What expectations do you think they have about us?
- C. How do you think a Christian Minister should act in other cultures?

- D. How did Jesus, who was from the extra-terrestrial place of heaven, treat even the poorest earthlings?