

# Cultural Differences and the Communication of the Gospel

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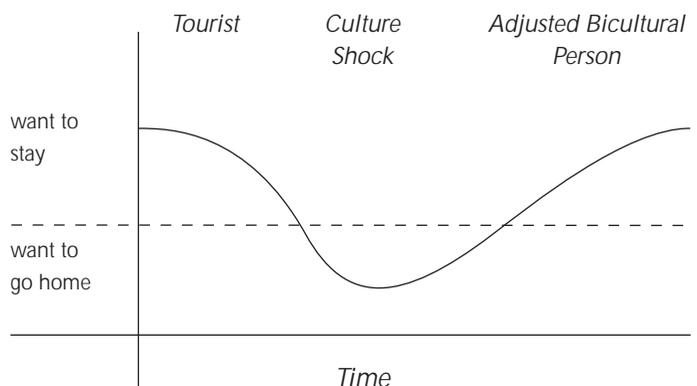
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**Y**ou were excited. You were accepted as a missionary. The church held a big farewell in which you were center stage when all your life you had sat only in the pews. There was the thrilling, sorrowful parting at the airport, the flight in the giant 747, and a little uneasiness as you landed in a strange country. But friends were there to meet you. You couldn't read the menu at the restaurant so you pointed knowingly at something you didn't recognize and took your chances. You recognized half the food on the plate. The other half looked inedible—was it roasted insects or goat's entrails? Later you went to the market to buy oranges but the woman couldn't understand a word you said. You pointed to your mouth and rubbed your stomach like a little child. You had to pay her, but all you could do was hold out a handful of the strange coins for her to take what she wanted. You were sure you were cheated. You got on a bus to go across town, and got lost. You imagined yourself spending the next ten years riding the bus trying to get home. You got sick and you were sure the local doctor didn't know how to treat American diseases. Now you are sitting on your bed, wanting to go back where you came from. How did you get yourself into this anyway, and what do you say to your church after a few weeks of 'missions' abroad? "The job is done"? "I can't take it"?

Your reaction is perfectly normal.

## Level of Satisfaction



Culture shock is a sense of cultural disorientation in a different society.



It is the culture shock everyone experiences when they enter a new culture. Tourists do not really experience it because they return to their American-style hotels after riding around looking at the native scenery. Culture shock is not a reaction to poverty or to the lack of sanitation. For foreigners coming to the U.S. the experience is same. It is the shock in discovering that all the cultural patterns we have learned are now meaningless. We know less about living here than the children, and we must begin again to learn the elementary things of life—how to speak, greet one another, eat, market, travel, and a thousand other things. Culture shock really sets in when we realize that *this now is going to be our life and home*.

## THE CONCEPT OF CULTURE

To understand culture shock and the problems of intercultural communication, we

need to first understand the concept of “culture.” We will begin with a simple definition that we can modify later, as our understanding of the concept grows. Culture is “the more or less integrated systems of beliefs, feelings and values, and their associated symbols, patterns of behavior and products shared by a group of people.” Let us unpack this definition.

### Patterns of Behavior and Products

Most people begin learning a culture by observing the behavior of the people and looking for patterns in their behavior. We see two Americans grasp each other’s hand and shaking them. In Mexico we see them embrace. In India each puts his hands together and raises them toward his forehead with a slight bow of the head—a gesture of greeting that is efficient, for it permits a person to greet a great many others in a single motion, and clean, for people need not touch each



other. The latter is particularly important in a society where the touch of an untouchable defiles a high caste person and forces him to take a purification bath. Among the Siriano of South America, people spit on each other's chests in greeting.

Probably the strangest form of greeting was observed by Jacob Loewen in Panama. Leaving the jungle on a small plane with the local native chief, he noticed the chief go to all his fellow tribesmen and suck their mouths. When Loewen inquired about this custom, the chief explained that they had learned this custom from the white man. They had seen that every time white people went up in planes, they sucked the mouths of their people as magic to insure a safe journey. Americans, in fact, have two types of greeting, shaking hands and sucking mouths, and we must be careful not to use the wrong form with the wrong people.

Not all behavior is culturally shaped. In formal situations, behavior and speech are carefully circumscribed by the culture. Everyday life is usually less formal; we are allowed to choose from a range of permissible behaviors. Our choices reflect the occasion (swimming suits are out of place in the classroom) and our personalities. Our culture is the sets of rules that govern the games of life that we play in our society. Like players in most games, we often try to "bend the rules" a little and get away with it. If we are caught, we are punished; but if not, we gain some advantage or sense of achievement. All cultures have ways to enforce their rules, such as gossip, ostracism and force, but not all violators are punished. A society may ignore some transgressors, particularly those who are important and powerful. Or it may be unable to enforce a specific rule, particularly when a great many people break it. In those cases cultural ordinances may die, and the culture changes accordingly.

Culture also includes material objects—houses, baskets, canoes, masks, carts, computers, and the like. People live in nature and must adapt or mold it for their own purposes. Most traditional societies live in an environment largely formed by nature. In complex industrial societies, much of the human

environment is culturally molded. Electricity blurs the distinction between day and night, and planes and phones break the barriers of geographic distance.

Human behavior and material objects are readily observable. Consequently, they are important entry points in our study of a culture.

## THE HEART OF CULTURE: BELIEFS, FEELINGS AND VALUES

At the heart of a culture is the shared beliefs, feelings and values of a community of people. Through their experiences, people form mental pictures or maps of their world. For instance, a person living in Chicago has a mental image of the streets around her home, those she uses to go to church and work, and the major arteries she uses to get around town. Obviously, there are a great many streets not on her map and as long as she does not go to these areas, she has no need for knowing them.

Not all our ideas reflect the realities of the external world. Many are the creations of our minds, used to bring order and meaning to our experiences. For example, we see a great many trees in our lifetime, and each is different from all others. But it would be impossible for us to give a separate name for each of them, or to each bush, each house, each car—in short, to every experience we have. In order to think and speak we must reduce this infinite variety of experiences into a manageable number of concepts by generalizations. We call these shades of color "red," those "orange," and the third set "yellow." These categories are the creations of our minds. Other people in other languages lump them together into a single color, or divide them into two or more colors. Do these people see as many colors as we? Certainly. The fact is, we can create as many categories in our minds as we want, and we can organize them into larger systems for describing and explaining human experiences. Culture is a people's mental map of their world. This is not only a map of their physical world, but also a map for determining action. It provides them with a guide for their decisions and behavior.



**Beliefs**

Shared beliefs about the nature of reality makes communication and community life possible. They provide people with the categories and logic they use to experience the world. Beliefs also tells people what exists and what does not. For instance, most Westerners believe in atoms, electrons, gravity and DNA, although they have never seen them. South Indian villagers believe in fierce *rakshasas*—spirits with big heads, bulging eyes, fangs and long wild hair, which inhabit trees and rocky places, and jump on unwary travelers at night. Not all Indians believe in *rakshasas*, just as not all Americans believe in God. But all must take into account the categories that exist in their culture.

**Feelings**

Culture also has to do with the feelings people have—with their notions of beauty, tastes in food and dress, likes and dislikes, and ways of enjoying themselves or expressing sorrow. People in one culture like their food hot, in another, sweet or bland. In some cultures people are encouraged to sing in sharp, piercing voices, in others to sing in deep, mellow tones. Members of some societies learn to express their emotions and may be aggressive and bellicose; in others they learn to be self-controlled and calm. Some religions encourage the use of meditation, mysticism and drugs to achieve inner peace and

tranquility. Others stress ecstasy through frenzied songs, dances and self-torture.

The affective dimension of culture is reflected in standards of beauty, and taste in clothes, houses and food. It also plays an important part in human relationships—in our notions of etiquette and fellowship. We communicate love, hate, scorn and a hundred other attitudes, by our facial expressions, tones of voice and gestures.

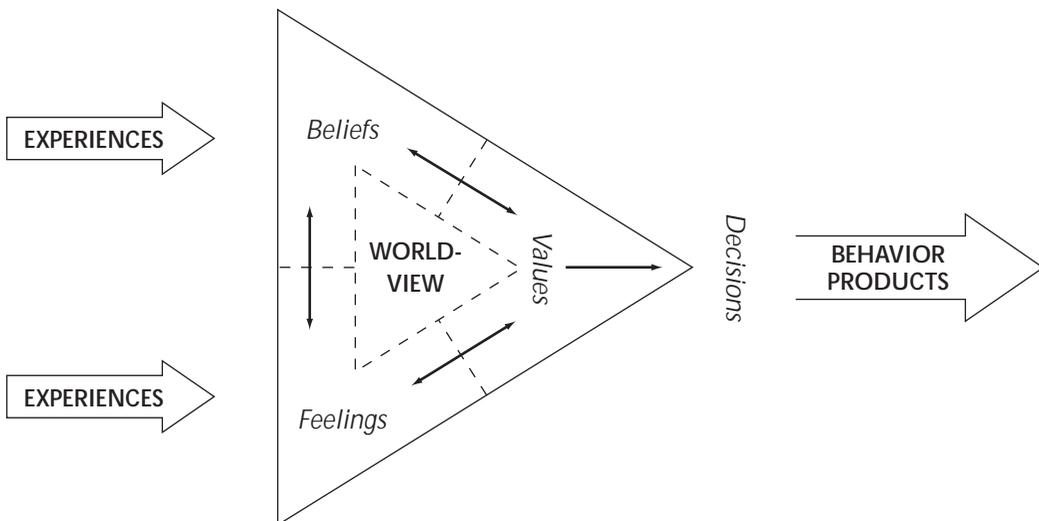
**Values and Allegiances**

Culture includes the values by which people judge the experiences of their lives. These values determine what is right and wrong, what is good and what is evil, in the culture. For example, in ancient Japan it was a sin to beat a horse while it is lying on its back, and to sow seed where someone else has already done so. In parts of India, losing one’s temper is a greater sin than sexual immorality.

**More or Less Integrated**

A culture is made up of a great many patterns of behavior, ideas and products. But it is more than the sum of them. These patterns are integrated, more or less, into larger cultural complexes and total cultural systems by a worldview which forms the core of the culture. This worldview is made up by the fundamental cognitive, affective and evaluative assumptions the people make about reality. Because these assumptions are taken for

**The Dimensions of Culture**



granted, they are generally unexamined and therefore largely implicit. They are what people 'think with,' not what they 'think about.' People believe that the world really is the way they see it. Those who disagree are wrong or crazy.

To see this integration of cultural patterns we need only observe the average American. On entering an auditorium to listen to a musical performance, she looks until he finds a chair—a platform on which to perch himself. If all these platforms are occupied, he leaves because the auditorium is "full." Obviously, there are a great many places on the floor where he can sit, but this is not culturally acceptable, at least not at the performance of a symphony orchestra.

At home Americans have different kinds of platforms for sitting in the living room, at the dining table, at a desk and on the lawn. They have large platforms on which they sleep at night. When they travel abroad, their greatest fear is being caught at night without a platform in a private room, so they make hotel reservations well ahead of time and pay hundreds of dollars for a single night's sleep. People from many parts of the world know that all one needs at night is a blanket to keep clean and warm, and a flat space—and the world is full of flat places. At the airport, at three in the morning, American travelers are draped uncomfortably over chairs because they would rather be dignified than comfortable. Travelers from other parts of the world sleep soundly stretched out on the floor.

Not only do Americans sit and sleep on platforms, they build their houses on them, hang them on their walls, and put fences around them to hold their children. Why this obsession with platforms? Behind all these behavior patterns is a basic worldview assumption that floors are dirty. This explains their obsession for getting off the floor. It also explains why they keep their shoes on when they enter the house, and why the mother scolds the child when it picks a potato chip off the floor and eats it, even though the floor has just been washed.

In Japan the people believe floors are clean. They take their shoes off at the door, and sleep and sit on mats on the floor. When

we walk into their home with our shoes on, they feel much like we do when someone walks on our couch with their shoes on.

## CULTURAL DIFFERENCES AND THE MESSENGER

So long as we live in our own culture, we are largely unaware of it. When we enter new cultures, however, we become keenly aware of the fact that other people live differently. At first we see the differences in dress, food, language and behavior. Then we learn that there are profound differences in beliefs, feelings and values. Finally, we begin to realize that there are fundamental differences in worldviews. People in different cultures do not live in the same world with different labels attached to it, but in radically different worlds.

Cultural differences are at the center of the missionary task which is to minister to 'others.' How can we communicate the Gospel in other languages, and plant vital churches in cultures which differ markedly from our own?

### Misunderstandings

After we get beyond our initial culture shock, we are faced with three lifelong problems. The first has to do with cognitive misunderstandings. Some missionaries in Congo had trouble in building rapport with the people. Finally, one old man explained the people's hesitancy to befriend the missionaries. "When you came, you brought your strange ways," he said. "You brought tins of food. On the outside of one was a picture of corn. When you opened it, inside was corn and you ate it. Outside another was a picture of meat, and inside was meat, and you ate it. And then when you had your baby, you brought in small tins. On the outside was a picture of babies, and you opened it and fed the inside to your child!" To us, the people's confusion sounds foolish, but it is all too logical. In the absence of other information, the people must draw their own conclusions about our actions. We do the same about theirs. We think they have no sense of time when, by our culture, they show up late. We accuse them of lying, when they tell us things to please us rather than as they really are



(although we have no trouble saying “Just fine!” when someone asks “How are you?”). The result is cultural misunderstanding, and this leads to poor communication and poor relationships.

Edward Hall points out how different views of time can lead to confusion (1959). When, for example, two Americans agree to meet at ten o’clock, they are “on time” if they show up from five minutes before to five minutes after ten. If one shows up at fifteen after, he is “late” and mumbles an unfinished excuse. He must simply acknowledge that he is late. If he shows up at half past, he should have a good apology, and by eleven he may as well not show up. His offense is unpardonable.

In parts of Arabia, the people have a different concept or map of time. If the meeting time is ten o’clock, only a servant shows up at ten—in obedience to his master. The proper time for others is from ten forty-five to eleven fifteen, just long enough after the set time to show their independence and equality. This arrangement works well, for when two equals agree to meet at ten, each shows up, and expects the other to show up, at about ten forty-five.

The problem arises when an American meets an Arab and arranges a meeting for ten o’clock. The American shows up at ten, the “right time” according to him. The Arab shows up at ten forty-five, the “right time” according to him. The American feels the Arab has no sense of time at all (which is false), and the Arab is tempted to think Americans act like servants (which is also false).

Misunderstandings are based on ignorance of the beliefs, feelings and values of another culture. The solution is to learn how the other culture works. Our first task in entering a new culture is to be a student of its ways. Whenever a culture ‘makes no sense’ to us, we must assume that the problem is ours, because the people’s behavior makes sense to them.

## Ethnocentrism

Most Americans shudder when they enter an Indian restaurant and see people eating curry and rice with their fingers. Imagine diving into the mashed potatoes and gravy with your hand at a Thanksgiving dinner. Our response

seems natural, to us. Early in life each of us grows up at the center of our own world. In other words, we are egocentric. Only with a great deal of difficulty do we learn to break down the circle we draw between me and You, and learn to look at things from the viewpoint of others in our group. Similarly, when we first encounter other cultures, we find it hard to see the world through other cultural eyes. We are ethnocentric.

The root of ethnocentrism is our human tendency to respond to other people’s ways by using our own affective assumptions, and to reinforce these responses with deep feelings of approval or disapproval. When we are confronted by another culture, our own is called into question. Our defense is to avoid the issue by concluding that our culture is better and other people are less civilized.

But ethnocentrism is a two-way street. We feel that people in other cultures are primitive, and they judge us to be uncivilized. Some North Americans were hosting a visiting Indian scholar at a restaurant, when one of them who had never been abroad asked the inevitable question, “Do you really eat with your fingers in India?” Implicit in his question, of course, was his cultural attitude that eating with one’s fingers is crude and dirty. North Americans may use fingers for carrot sticks, potato chips, and sandwiches, but never for mashed potatoes and gravy or T-bone steaks. The Indian scholar replied, “You know, in India we look at it differently than you do. I always wash my hands carefully before I eat, and I only use my right hand. And besides, my fingers have not been in anyone else’s mouth. When I look at a fork or spoon, I often wonder how many other strangers have already had them in their mouths!”

Ethnocentrism occurs wherever cultural differences are found. North Americans are shocked when they see the poor of other cultures living in the streets. People in those same societies would be just as appalled to observe how we North Americans surrender our aged and sick and the bodies of our departed to strangers for care.

The solution to ethnocentrism is empathy. We need to learn to appreciate other cultures and their ways. But our feelings of superiority



and our negative attitudes toward strange customs run deep and are not easily rooted out.

### Premature Judgments

We have misunderstandings on the cognitive level and ethnocentrism on the affective level. On the evaluative level we tend to judge another culture too quickly, before we learn to understand and appreciate them. Our initial assessment is often that they are somehow inferior and ignorant.

As people learn to understand and appreciate other cultures, they come to respect these cultures as viable ways of organizing human life. Some are stronger in one area, such as technology, and others in other areas such as family ties. But all “do the job,” that is, they all make life possible and more or less meaningful. Out of this recognition of the integrity of all cultures, emerged the concept of cultural relativism: the belief that all cultures are equally good—that no culture has the right to stand in judgment of others.

This position of cultural relativism is very attractive. It shows high respect for other people and their cultures and avoids the errors of ethnocentrism and premature judgments. The price we pay, however, in adopting total cultural relativism is the loss of such things as truth and righteousness. If all explanations of reality are equally valid, we can no longer speak of error, and if all behavior is justified according to its cultural context, we can no longer speak of sin. There is then no need for the gospel and no reason for mission.

What other alternative do we have? How do we avoid the errors of premature and ethnocentric judgments and still affirm truth and righteousness? There is a growing awareness that all human activities are full of judgments. Scientists expect one another to be honest and open in reporting their findings and careful in the topics of their research. Social scientists must respect the rights of their clients and the people they study. Businessmen, government officials, and others also have values by which they live. We cannot avoid making judgments, nor can a society exist without them.

On what basis, then, can we judge other cultures without becoming ethnocentric? We have a right as individuals to make judg-

ments with regard to ourselves, and this includes judging other cultures. But these judgments should be well informed. We need to understand and appreciate other cultures *before* we judge them. Our tendency to make premature judgments is based on ignorance and ethnocentrism.

As Christians, we claim another basis for evaluation, namely, Biblical norms. As divine revelation we stand in judgment of all cultures, affirming the good in human creativity

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and condemning the evil. To be sure, non-Christians may reject these norms and use their own. We can only present the gospel in a spirit of redemptive love and let it speak for itself. Truth, in the end, does not depend on what we think or say, but on reality itself. When we bear witness to the gospel, we do not claim

a superiority for ourselves, but affirm the truth of divine revelation.

But what keeps us from interpreting the Scripture from our own cultural point of view, and so imposing many of our own cultural norms on other people? First, we need to recognize that we bring our cultural biases with us when we interpret the Scriptures. We must be open to recognizing these biases when they are pointed out to us. We also need to let the gospel work in the lives of new Christians and recognize that the same Holy Spirit who leads us, is at work in them. We need to allow them the greatest privilege we allow ourselves, the right to make mistakes and to learn from them.

Second, we need to study both the culture in which we minister and our own in order to compare and evaluate the two. The process of genuinely seeking to understand another culture breaks down our cultural biases, and enables us to appreciate the good in other cultures. It is important, too that Christian leaders in other societies learn our culture to understand us.



The dialogue between us and our national colleagues is important in building bridges of cultural understanding. It is also important in helping us develop a more culture-free understanding of God's truth and moral standards as revealed in the Bible. Our colleagues can detect our cultural blind spots better than we can, just as we often see their cultural judgments better than they. Dialogue with Christians from other cultures helps keep us from the legalism of imposing foreign beliefs and norms on a society without taking into account its specific situations. It also helps keep us from a relativism that denies truth and reduces ethics to cultural norms.

### Evaluation in the Three Dimensions

As humans, we pass judgments on beliefs to determine whether they are true or false, on feelings to decide likes and dislikes, and on values to differentiate right from wrong. As missionaries we are faced with evaluating other cultures and our own along each of these dimensions.

On the cognitive level, we must deal with different perceptions of reality, including diverse ideas about hunting, farming, building houses, human procreation and diseases. For example, in south India villagers believe illnesses are caused by angry local goddesses. Consequently, sacrifices must be made to them to stop the plague. We must understand the people's beliefs in order to understand their behavior, but we may decide that modern theories of disease are more effective in stopping illnesses. On the other hand, after examining their knowledge of hunting wild game, we may conclude that it is better than our own.

We need to evaluate not only the people's folk sciences, but also their religious beliefs, for these affect their understanding of Scripture. Although they already have concepts such as God, ancestors, sin and salvation, these may or not be adequate for an understanding of the gospel.

### Becoming Global Christians

Something happens to us when we learn to live deeply in a new culture: we become global people. Our parochialism, based on our unquestioned feeling that there is really one

civilized way to live, and our way is it, is shattered. We must deal with cultural variety—with the fact that people build cultures in different ways, and that they believe their cultures are better than ours. Aside from some curiosity at our foreignness, they are not interested in learning our ways.

But to the extent we identify with people of another culture and become global, we find ourselves alienated from our kinsmen and friends in our homeland. This is not reverse culture shock, although we will experience that when we return home after a long stay abroad. It is a basic difference in how we now look at things. We have moved from a philosophy that assumes uniformity to one that has to cope with variety, and our old friends often don't understand us when we return. In time, we may find our closest associates are other global people.

In one sense, global people never fully adjust to one culture—their own or their adopted one. Within themselves, they are part of both. When Americans are abroad, they dream of America, and need little rituals that reaffirm this part of themselves—a food package from home, a letter, an American visitor from whom they can learn the latest news from "home." When in America, they dream of their adopted country, and need little rituals that reaffirm this part of themselves—a visitor from that country, a meal with its food. Global people seem happiest when they are flying from one country to the other.

## CULTURAL DIFFERENCES AND THE MESSAGE

Cultural differences affect the messengers, but they also affect the gospel message. Each society looks at the world in its own way, and that way is encoded in its language and culture. No language is unbiased, no culture theological neutral. Consequently, the translation and communication of the gospel in new cultures is no easy task. If we do not understand this, we are in danger of being ineffective messengers at best, and, at worst, of communicating a gospel that is misunderstood and distorted.

Cultural differences affect the message in several ways. First, the messengers must



communicate in the language the people understand. This means learning new languages and translating the Bible into these languages. This involves not only using local words that have similar meanings to the original, but also checking that the meanings of those words in the broader context of that culture do not introduce distortion. Second, new believers must learn how to deal with their old cultural ways. Can they continue to participate in local festivals, sing old songs, cremate the dead, venerate their ancestors and go to the diviner for guidance? Birth rites, weddings, funerals and other rituals must be made indigenous, yet truly Christian. Third, if the church is to function well, church buildings, forms of worship and leadership styles must be adapted to fit the local cultural practices. Fourth, evangelistic methods must be chosen that fit the culture. Methods that work in small tribal societies normally do not work in rural or urban settings. Nor do methods appropriate for the city, work in tribal and rural societies. Finally, the people must develop a theology in which Scripture speaks to them in their particular historical and cultural settings. These are all part of the contextualization of the gospel in new cultural settings.

Contextualization raises difficult questions that must be addressed. We will examine three of them.

### **Gospel and Culture**

What is the relationship between the gospel and culture? We must distinguish between them, for if we do not, we will be in danger of making our culture the message. The gospel then becomes democracy, capitalism, pews and pulpits, Robert's Rules of Order, and suits and ties on Sunday. One of the primary hindrances to communication is the foreignness of the message and, to a great extent, the foreignness of Christianity has been the cultural load we have placed upon it. As Mr. Murthi, an Indian evangelist, put it, "Do not bring us the gospel as a potted plant. Bring us the seed of the gospel and plant it in our soil."

It is not always easy to distinguish between the gospel and human cultures for the

gospel, like any message, must be put into cultural forms to be understood and communicated by people. We cannot think without conceptual categories and symbols to express them. But we can be careful to let the biblical message shape not only our beliefs, but also the categories and assumptions of our culture.

A failure to differentiate between the biblical message and other messages leads to confusion between cultural relativism and Biblical absolutes. For example, in many churches where it was once considered sinful for women to cut their hair or wear lipstick, or for people to attend movies, these are now acceptable. Some, therefore, argue that today, premarital sex and adultery are thought to be sinful, but that in time they, too, will be accepted.

It is true that many things we considered sin are now accepted in the church. Are there, therefore, no moral absolutes? We must recognize that each culture defines certain behaviors as "sinful," and that, as the culture changes, its definition of what is sin also changes. There are, on the other hand, moral principles in Scripture that we hold to be absolute. Even here we must be careful, however, for some biblical norms, such as leaving the land fallow every seventh year and not reaping the harvest (Lev 25) or greeting one another with a holy kiss (1 Th 5:26) seem to apply to specific cultural situations.

### **Contextualization Versus Noncontextualization**

Cultures are made up of systems of beliefs and practices that are built upon implicit assumptions that people make about themselves, about the world around them, and about ultimate realities. How can Christians communicate and embody the gospel in terms of these worldviews and the beliefs and practices associated with them, when many of these are unbiblical?

One response has been to reject most of the old beliefs and customs as "pagan." Drums, songs, dramas, dances, body decoration, marriage customs and funeral rites are frequently condemned because they are thought to be directly or indirectly related to



traditional religions, hence unacceptable for Christians. This wholesale rejection of old cultural ways creates problems. First, it leaves a cultural vacuum that needs to be filled, and this is often done by importing the customs of the missionary. Drums, cymbals, and other traditional instruments are replaced by organs and pianos. Instead of creating new lyrics that fit native music, Western hymns and melodies are introduced. Pews replace mats on floors, and western style churches are built, although they appear incongruous alongside mud huts and thatch gathering halls. It is no surprise, then, that Christianity is often seen as a foreign religion, and Christian converts as aliens in their own land.

A second problem arises when missionaries attempt to suppress old cultural ways. These simply go underground. New converts come to church for worship, but during the week turn to shamans and magicians for answers to the everyday problems of their lives.

A third problem with the wholesale condemnation of traditional cultures is that it not only turns missionaries and church leaders into police, but keeps converts from growing by denying them the right to make their own decisions. A church only grows spiritually if its members learn to apply the teachings of the gospel to their own lives.

A second response to traditional ways is to see them as basically good, and to accept them uncritically into the church. Few, if any, changes are seen as necessary when people become Christians. Those who advocate this approach have a deep respect for others and their cultures, and recognize the high value people place on their own cultural heritage. They also recognize that the "foreignness" of the gospel has been one of the major barriers to its acceptance in many parts of the world.

This approach has serious weaknesses. It overlooks the fact that there are corporate and cultural sins as well as personal transgressions. Sin is found in cultural beliefs and exhibited as group pride, segregation against others and idolatry. The gospel calls not only individuals, but societies and cultures to change. Contextualization must mean the communication of the gospel not only in

ways the people understand, but in ways that also challenge them individually and corporately to turn from their evil ways.

Another weakness in uncritical contextualization is that it opens the doors to syncretisms of all kinds. If Christians continue in beliefs and practices that stand in opposition to the gospel, these in time will mix with their newfound faith and produce various forms of neopaganism.

If both uncritical rejection and uncritical acceptance of old ways undermine the mission task, what should we and Christian converts do with the people's cultural heritage? A third approach is to evaluate it in the light of biblical teachings. The first step is to study the old ways in order to understand them. The missionary and church leaders should help new converts to examine their traditional practices. The next step is to lead the church in a Bible study related to the question under consideration. For example, the leaders can use the occasions of weddings and funerals to teach Christian beliefs about marriage and death. This is a critical step, for if the people do not clearly understand the biblical teachings, they will be unable to deal with their cultural ways. The third step is for the congregation to evaluate critically their own past customs in the light of their new biblical understandings, and to make decisions regarding their use. They will keep many of their old ways, because these do not distort the gospel. They will reject other ways as unchristian. They will reinterpret other ways to convey the Christian message. For example, they will give Christian words to their native lyrics. They will develop new symbols and rituals to communicate the gospel in ways they understand. And out of the process they will create beliefs and practices that are both biblical and contextually appropriate.

### **Conversion and Unforeseen Side Effects**

Since cultural traits are linked together into larger wholes, changes in one or more of them often lead to unforeseen changes in other areas of the culture. For example, in one part of Africa, when the people became Christians, their villages also became dirty. The reason for



this was that they were now not afraid of evil spirits which they believed hid in refuse. So they no longer had to clean it up.

Many cultural traits serve important functions in the lives of the people. If we remove these without providing a substitute, the consequences can be tragic. In some places husbands with more than one wife had to give up all but one when they became Christian. But no arrangements were made for the wives who were put away. Many of them ended up in prostitution or slavery.

What implications does an understanding of culture and cultural differences have for us when we minister in another culture? We need to recognize that the effective communication of the gospel is central to our task. There is little point going ten thousand miles to give our lives if we cannot bridge the final five feet. Inter-cultural communication is a complex process. If we do not understand it,

we will be unable to communicate the gospel to the people.

As we learn to effectively communicate the gospel interculturally, however, we must never overlook the fact that God is at work through his Spirit in the hearts of the people, preparing them for the Good News. Without this, true conversion and Christian maturity is impossible. God uses the imperfect means of human beings to make his message known to us and through us, to others. And even when we are unskilled in transmitting the message, he often uses it to transform the lives of people. This is not to justify our neglect of understanding intercultural communication, but to say that, in the end, the communication of the gospel depends on the work of God in the hearts of people whom he has prepared. Christian communication must always be accompanied by prayer and obedience to the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

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## Study Questions

1. What integrates beliefs, values, and feelings within a given culture?
2. Distinguish the errors of ethnocentrism and what Hiebert calls "premature judgments."
3. How is it possible to become what Hiebert calls "global people?"
4. Of what use for cross-cultural communication is identifying beliefs, feelings and values?

