CHAPTER 7

APPLIED ANTHROPOLOGY IN MISSIONS

"Good missionaries have always been good anthropologists." Thus missionary linguist Eugene Nida begins his classic work, *Customs and Cultures*.[1] In fact, all missionaries either learn anthropology in school or on the job. Relating correctly to other cultures is the basic element of the missionary task, and those who find success on the field are those who do it well.

What makes the study of cultural anthropology so essential to Christian missions is that thousands of cultures are in the world, and each is different from yours to one degree or another. Every people group has its own rules for living, including rules about such things as the "right" way to eat, work, communicate, show respect, worship, marry, and govern society. They also have their own values that define what they judge to be delicious food, melodious music, beautiful art, and the way they measure poverty or wealth. The reason their culture seems so strange to you when you first arrive is simply that it is not your own. Because you did not grow up there, you do not automatically fit in.

Enculturation is what happens when you grow up in a particular place learning to live appropriately in that society. You naturally learn the language, appreciate the music, enjoy the food and the rhythm of life, play the popular sports, use and relate to the common sense of humor, and consider to be second nature every other aspect of daily life that is natural to that place. Other people who did not grow up in your home culture do not know your particular patterns, just as you do not know theirs. The degree to which each culture is different means the missionary must adjust in that same degree to be effective in intercultural ministry.

In its broadest sense, *anthropology* simply means "the study of man." However, many divisions of anthropology are devoted to researching and understanding languages, biological distinctions, ancient societies, musical systems, and even the gastronomy of diverse groups. Our focus in this chapter is on cultural anthropology, the study of the

[1] Eugene Nida, *Customs and Cultures* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1975), xi.

cultures of mankind, and the implications for missions.

UNDERSTANDING CULTURE

Culture has existed since the garden of Eden; whenever two or three people interact, a culture guides them. As observed in chapter 2, as the discipline of cultural anthropology has developed, countless different definitions of *culture* have been proposed. You will recall that we showed, fortunately, they are all variations on the same theme of shared beliefs, values, and patterns of behavior of a group of people. Culture, then, is the learned and shared design or pattern of living for a group of people. It is not innate but learned as one grows up among a people, and then it is passed on to the next generation, giving them a basis for proper conduct, thinking, and interaction. Cultures are ever developing and evolving with new innovations in technology, the latest discoveries and inventions, the annual additions to the language's vocabulary and dictionaries; in turn, the next generation's culture will receive, adapt, and eventually pass on yet another cultural system.

Evaluating Culture Systems

Cultural anthropologists have devised terms to refer to the many aspects of their discipline. The work of the missionary faces the same challenges ministers in their home countries face, but it is complicated by cultural misunderstandings because a newcomer does not view life the same way the culture sees it. The way an insider thinks of his own culture is called the *emic perspective*. He knows intuitively why people act, believe, and speak as they do in his home culture. He knows to eat certain foods for breakfast and others later in the day, the proper volume to use, and the appropriate distance to stand from one another when speaking in a public place. The point of view of an outsider who comes to the culture from another is the *etic perspective*. The reasons and routines of the new culture's life that come naturally to the insider are a mystery to him.

The missionary's challenge is to avoid judging the culture as inferior before he understands it. This unfair critique of other cultures, considering them not as wise or as good as one's own, is called *ethnocentrism*. We tend to think our culture is the center of

the universe and that everyone else should see life as we do. We all have this tendency because our own culture is all we know; thus, it seems "the right way to do it." We can never totally erase ethnocentrism, but being aware of it can help us delay critical judgment and learn to appreciate many aspects of other cultures.

We use the term *personality* to describe kinds of people. We may describe them as outgoing and funny or introspective and introverted. Sometimes we say we have a "personality clash" with a certain person because of his nature. Just as we use commonly understood terms to describe another's personality type, we can better understand other people groups, and do so more quickly, by referring to their *culturality* type.

Missionaries and cultural anthropologists have researched and categorized the cultures of the world in various ways. Sarah Lanier has described the cultures of the world as tending to belong to hot-or cold-climate cultures, having been influenced by the weather of their home region. While she allows for the anomalies of Inuit people in the cold Arctic zones or Eastern European peoples that live more as hot-climate cultures, she demonstrates that people of the hotter climates of the world tend to be group oriented, relational, inclusion minded, indirect in their communication, and think more of the event at hand than what the clock says. Those in the colder climates tend toward individualism, direct communication, and have a higher value of privacy. Lanier is only one of those who have helped missionaries with a system to understand the cultures of the world.[2]

Geert Hofstede and others believe cultures can be classified as more or less extreme in their particular position along five dimensions—identity, hierarchy, gender, truth, and virtue—resulting in ten different possible characteristics. Hofstede points out that no culture actually embraces any of the dimensions in their extreme but tends toward one end or the other. However, he uses the ten descriptors represented by the two extremes of each of the five dimensions to help us understand them. For instance, this helps us understand whether a culture's identity is individualistic or collectivistic.[3]

[2] Sarah A. Lanier, *Foreign to Familiar: A Guide to Understanding Hot and Cold Climate Cultures* (Hagerstown, MD: McDougal Publishing, 2000).

[3] Gert Jan Hofstede, Paul B. Pedersen, and Geert H. Hofstede, *Exploring Culture: Exercises, Stories*

Sherwood Lingenfelter helps the missionary understand not only the culture to which he goes to serve but also his own. He includes an instrument the missionary may fill out and grade to understand his own preferences for living life—oriented by the clock or the event, thinking of life in dichotomistic[4] or holistic terms, anticipating crises in order to avoid them or simply living as if crises do not happen. He writes that cultures tend to be ascribed-status conscious or value personal achievement more. Like others, Lingenfelter recognizes that some cultures are more concerned with saving face and avoiding embarrassment at all costs, while others are happy-go-lucky, enjoying life as it comes.

Richard Lewis believes it is helpful to consider cultures relative to their position on a triangle. One corner of the triangle is *linear-active* people who are organized planners and do one thing at a time, such as North American and Western European cultures. *Multi-actives* are cultures in Latin America and much of Africa that are people oriented and may do several activities at once, moving freely back and forth among them. *Reactives* are respect-oriented, introverted listeners who prefer to respond rather than push their opinion first. Reactives are typically American indigenous peoples and Asian cultures. Studying any of these suggested systems is helpful to the missionary who wants to understand and be understood more quickly in another culture.

While there are great benefits to knowing your own *culturality,* with its tendencies and preferences, and how to anticipate the culture in which you will serve, this knowledge should not be used as a tool for choosing a culture for missionary service where you think you will fit in more easily. Rather, as God guides you to the culture of your missionary call, you will be able to anticipate and prepare yourself, your family, and your team for the challenges and tension points you know you will encounter.

There are many ways to study and understand the cultures of the world in addition to

and Synthetic Cultures (Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press, 2002), 91–160. In addition to the system found in this excellent resource, iPad and iPhone apps are available that locate countries of the world on each dimension's continua.

[4] *Dichotomistic* refers to a binary, either-or approach to life (the thief is guilty or innocent), while *holistic* considers the whole of the matter (he only stole bread because his family was sick and starving).

these systems. It has often been said that when Adam and Eve fell in the garden, three things entered the world: guilt, shame, and fear. While every culture has all three of these elements, they tend to emphasize one of the three. Many missionary anthropologists have found them to be helpful guidelines for understanding and relating to other cultures. We always find the cultures represented by each of these aspects with a partner characteristic.

The cultures of the world tend to live on a balance of guilt-innocence, shame-honor, or fear-power. Western cultures that are more dichotomistic in their orientation see people as either guilty or innocent. Asian cultures and most cultures embracing Islam have a high value of honor and avoid shame at all costs. Animistic cultures are constantly aware of evil spirits, ancestors' influences, magic, curses, and sorcery and live in fear of these or anyone who has the skill to manipulate their power. To understand and appreciate the beliefs, worldview, and behavior of fear-power or shame-honor cultures and how they differ from the guilt-innocence orientation of the West, missionaries are wise to learn about the basic life orientation of their target cultures regarding these three aspects.

Ethnographic research is the process of using skills and tools for investigating and learning about other cultures. The most basic tool in the missionary's toolbox is participant observation. Most missionaries use participant observation to some degree whether or not they call it by that term. It goes beyond merely observing daily life to asking why, when, how, and by whom something is done. As the missionary participates in life, the value and use of other ethnographic research tools become obvious. Skills necessary for informal, formal, and group interviews, interpreting data from surveys, recording life histories, bibliographic research, and many other tools constitute the ways missionaries can learn their people's worldview and culture. Computer programs that assist the missionary are valuable for streamlining the process, but living among the people, learning the language, eating the food, and living life as they do are essential in ethnographic research.

Intercultural Communication

Missionaries must learn how to effectively communicate the gospel in ways that are

both culturally appropriate and biblically faithful. Achieving one or the other is difficult for anyone; achieving both requires study and application. It does not come easily, and the missionary's miscommunicating attempts, despite his best efforts, often lead to exasperation. The temptation is to say nothing at all unless he can do so with those who share his native language. However, as I often tell my classes, "You cannot *not* communicate." Even your silence communicates, sometimes more "loudly" than any words would convey.

All new missionaries recognize that they must engage in language learning before they can communicate with the people. This lifelong process involves two distinct perspectives. One is to learn the language as a necessary tool so you may do the work you were sent to do, whether you relish the task or not. The second approach is to love the language, not only because it is the key to heart-to-heart communication with those you seek to reach but for its beauty, complexity, rhythm, and unique expression. This latter approach results in the missionary who effectively and almost effortlessly communicates the gospel and love of Christ for his hearers. This is akin to the difference between a pianist who has the skill to mechanically play the notes of the music and the one who has the music in his heart and soul; it becomes a part of him and flows through him. Some missionaries fail to learn the language well for a host of reasons, but the degree to which they do not know it well often correlates directly to their ineffectiveness in ministry.

Learning the new language well is the first step, learning to use it appropriately is the second, and both steps are essential. This is easily illustrated in the dialect prejudice we find in our own cultures. Those who live in the deep South may pejoratively prejudge someone with a "Yankee" accent, while those from the northern parts of the USA may prejudge a person who speaks with a thick southern drawl or a "redneck" accent. Imagine the ministry implications of a person who comes to the USA to serve as a missionary among a highly educated population in the Northeast but who learns English among the heavily accented Cajuns of Louisiana or the southern drawl of those in the Mississippi delta.

In the same way, societal groups and cultures that consider themselves the highest class will be reticent to accept "truth" from an unknown person who speaks with an accent of the lower class. The rich and powerful influential classes of Latin America tend

to look down on the indigenous peoples. Speaking Spanish with the accent of an indigenous person will negatively impact one's ministry among the elite classes. Where will you study the language when you get to the field? It should be as much of a factor as the language you need to learn.

Speaking at the appropriate volume, using idioms, humor, and turn-taking correctly in conversations will help the missionary fit in well. This is only learned in context and living life completely immersed in another culture. Students of Spanish throughout high school and college frequently only know how other gringos speak Spanish—not the unique colloquialisms and the rhythm of verbal expression of native speakers in the many and diverse cultures that speak Spanish.

As we have seen, each culture has its own worldview, beliefs, values, and systems of behavior. Culture is not synonymous with worldview; rather, they share a symbiotic relationship—each influencing (and being influenced by) the other. Whatever system we use to explain reality, where we came from, where we go when we die, where disease comes from, what the basic purpose of life is and so on, is our worldview, but we received it from others around us as we enculturated. This worldview in turn causes us to live in certain ways, embrace certain religions, marry, and bury in the ways that are part and parcel of our unique culture.

The point here is that, as Richard Weaver has insightfully observed, ideas have consequences.[5] What people perceive to be ultimate truth will determine the religions they develop and how they live. What they value as beautiful will guide their expressions of art, fashion, and music. All of these basic foundations will guide them in the rules of the game of life regarding behavior—ethical treatment of others—and they will continue to change as new developments require consensus behavior.

Intercultural communication refers to the skills that facilitate clear communication in a culture that is not your own. Think of culture and worldview as the operating system of a computer. You may have a "Mac brain" and find yourself serving as a missionary in a culture made up of "PC brains." The ways these computers operate both require electricity, programming, and software, and may seek to fulfill the same basic goals; but

[5] Richard Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

they do so differently. Unless some adjustment is made, there will not be a clear and successful outcome in the interchange.

Imagine someone encountering the problem 10 + 5 = _____ on a math test. If they answer 10 + 5 = 3, it would be wrong and marked incorrect. However, if the student encounters the problem in a "Learning to Tell Time" class, his answer would be correct. How many colors are there in the rainbow? How many days of the week are there? Some cultures recognize only two colors, others four, six, or seven. Some cultures do not count above three and hence do not number the days of the week as seven. Communication in such cultures must take into account the worldview, not merely the language, as if we need only concern ourselves with grammar and vocabulary.

When medical missionaries arrive in new cultures, they find they are faced with challenges they never had to consider. Now, in addition to the diagnosis and treatment of disease and injuries that are scientifically quantifiable, the physician must consider how to persuade a patient with an infection to take one pill per day for ten days when the patient believes his disease is the result of his ancestors' anger or a curse from an enemy's shaman. The patient wonders why these pills will appease their great-grandfather or counteract the spirit darts of a long-distance curse. A prescription for guaranteed failure would be to send out medical missionaries who are totally unaware that these challenges exist, and without teaching them that these beliefs are just as real in the patient's mind as the conclusions of a lab's blood tests are in the doctor's mind.

Learning language well and learning to use it in culturally appropriate ways are essential, as we have seen. Yet learning to use it effectively in context requires learning all of the forms of nonverbal communication, which is simply all the ways that we can communicate without actually using words. Edward Sapir wrote that we respond to gestures "in accordance with an elaborate code that is written nowhere, known by none, and understood by all."[6] Just as silence communicates a powerful message, so does touching someone's shoulder while speaking. In some contexts this is a helpful gesture that communicates sincerity, while in others it is an unwelcome and inappropriate

[6] Edward Sapir, *The Collected Works of Edward Sapir: Culture, Society, and Individual* (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter Publisher, 1999), 169.

advance.

Edward T. Hall was one of the first to address this aspect of nonverbal communication and write extensively about it.[7] He realized that the ways we communicate are more powerful than the words themselves. Studies on nonverbal communication demonstrate how important it is that missionaries learn it in order to influence the culture most effectively. In two different studies, researchers found that the majority of information taken from human interaction is nonverbal, revealing its astonishing level of importance. They found that the majority of meaning is communicated through facial and vocal expressions, not only the words we use:

- Facial Expressions: 55 percent
- Paralanguage (the way the words are said): 38 percent
- Verbal (the words themselves): 7 percent[8]

The words we speak communicate, but the specific word choice, facial expression, appearance, tone of voice (paralanguage), and accompanying gestures can strengthen or negate the surface meaning. You may strongly affirm your rights as a citizen, responding to a speech at a political rally by shouting, "Yeah. Right!" Or you may skeptically respond to a friend's remark that you have just won a million dollars by saying the same words but in a way that negates the meaning of both words. Short-term missions volunteers to Latin America sometimes will overhear the word *gringo* and ask if it is a derisive term. The answer usually depends, however, on the tone of voice and the facial expression of the person who said it. It could be a term of endearment or a pejorative term reserved for disliked North Americans.

[7] For additional information see *The Silent Language* (1959, 1981; repr., New York: Anchor, 1990), *The Hidden Dimension* (1969, 1982; repr., Anchor, 1990), and *The Dance of Life* (1983; repr., Anchor, 1984).

[8] See A. Mehrabian and M. Wiener, "Decoding of Inconsistent Communications," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 6 (1967): 109–14; and A. Mehrabian and S. R. Ferris, "Inference of Attitudes from Nonverbal Communication in Two Channels," *Journal of Consulting Psychology* 31, no. 3 (1967): 48–258.

Missiologist Donald K. Smith has a helpful insight to what he terms the Twelve-Signal System for communication.[9] You have learned how to use all twelve signals in your home culture, and you do so daily without even realizing it. Only one of the twelve signals is the language. As we have already seen, language is used differently, and dialects or accents may sometimes nuance meanings that are unintended. The reality of this, seen in the relationship of the USA and England, has been observed by many, including Winston Churchill, who is noted to have said, "We are two countries divided by a common language." Just as speaking English among non-English speakers will not communicate what you desire, each of the other eleven signals in the system must be studied to know how it is used in a new context. The twelve signals Smith recounts are:

1. Verbal—speech of the language itself (English, German, Spanish, Mandarin)
2. Written—symbols that represent speech (alphabets, Chinese characters)
3. Numeric—numbers and number systems (biblical numerology, police radio)
4. Pictorial—two-dimensional representations (No Smoking, Airport Exit)
5. Artifactual—three-dimensional representations and objects (uniforms, wedding rings)
6. Audio—use of nonverbal sounds and silence (school bells, alarm clocks)
7. Kinesic—body motions, facial expressions, posture (ballet, eye contact, slouching)
8. Optical—light and color (lighting in plays, white for weddings and black at funerals)
9. Tactile—touch and the sense of feel (touching another's shoulder or arm)
10. Spatial—use of space (distance apart in intimate, casual, or public speaking)
11. Temporal—use of time (making someone wait, being "on time")
12. Olfactory—taste and smell (perfume, scented candles)[10]

We may communicate using any one of these systems in isolation, but we rarely do.

[9] Donald K. Smith, *Creating Understanding* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 120.

[10] Ibid., 122.

More often we combine them into communication complexes that require really knowing the cultural nuances to discern a meaning. We all know how to use them at home, but when we use them all that same way in other cultures, we will miscommunicate. Many new missionaries realize their immediate need to learn the language, but only after unfortunate and unfruitful struggles in their interaction with others in their new culture do they realize the power of these nonverbal communication systems.

Some of the most powerful and commonly misused forms of communication are hand gestures. It is possible to reinforce a spoken message with a gesture. For instance, "Come on, hurry!" may be more emphatically communicated by rapidly and repeatedly waving your hand toward you from the waist to the face, or you can ask someone to wait while holding your hand at shoulder height palm outward. You may say, "OK!" and complement the phrase with a hand gesture of making a circle with the thumb and index finger with other fingers outstretched. All of these could miscommunicate and may be greatly offensive in some other cultures. We use gestures to substitute verbal communication at times. Each of the above gestures communicates even without the spoken word. "Come," "Wait," and "OK" are all commonly used gestures. In fact, we use them almost subconsciously, such as when the librarian hears a noise or whisper and almost reflexively raises her index finger to her lips.

Offensive gestures, such as the middle finger in our culture, communicate strongly and elicit an immediate unconscious visceral response. Imagine being in a culture that uses the raised middle finger to greet and wish you good health. Rounding the corner in an office building, you bump into someone who gives you a raised middle finger and continues down the hallway. You immediately experience anger, offense, indignation, or all of the above. Only when you remember that their intentions are completely innocent can you smooth your ruffled feathers.

The fact is, missionaries often unwittingly offend others through similar actions. Examples of such things are touching them with the left hand in countries where that hand is for personal hygiene and hence unclean, touching a Thai child on the head, which is a sacred part of their body, hugging people to greet them in nontactile cultures, or touching a member of the opposite sex in Muslim cultures.

Making eye contact when speaking in the West communicates honesty and frankness, but in other cultures it may be taken as a challenge to fight, indicate sexual interest, or communicate a lack of respect. Just as missionaries must learn the most adequate dialect of the spoken language, and learn to use it well, they must also learn the many nonverbal ways humans communicate and make the adjustments to their patterns of communicating when serving in another culture.

Using the language correctly in context is the key to clear communication. The contextual use of language is the key to being truly bilingual and bicultural. Learning the language is the key to learning the culture, and learning the culture is the key to language learning. Trying to learn one without the other will always fall short. The effective missionary learns the language and the culture and seeks to fit in. When the missionary does not fit in, especially in those situations where the missionary is all the culture knows about Christianity, nationals often assume that Jesus does not fit their culture either; to the degree that missionary is offensive to the culture, Jesus will be too. Remember, the missionary is the messenger and lives out Christianity before them. How do we make Christianity at home in the cultures of the world?

CONTEXTUALIZATION

The most basic explanation of *contextualization* is taking something from one place and putting it in another while retaining faithfulness and sensitivity to the original intent of the thing. For our purposes, contextualization is communicating the gospel, planting churches, discipling others, training leaders, and establishing Christianity in other areas of the world while being both faithful to God's Word and sensitive to the culture. Although a relatively new term in Christianity, the word has a turbulent history and is frequently the source of much controversy because different levels and theories of contextualization are found among missionaries today. Before we begin to explore some of the controversial forms, we should make sure we understand some ways we all contextualize without hesitation.

Traveling to other countries requires us to fit into the local culture to survive. My wife and I were recently in England, where visitors from the USA must adapt to the road rules

quickly because cars drive in the left lane there. As I travel around the world, I find that every culture has its own form of "comfort food," eating at times of day dictated by a rhythm that everyone seems to accept as normal, such as the evening meal at 9:00 or 10:00 p.m. in Madrid, or enjoying foods common to me but strange to imagine on my plate at certain times of the day, such as minced fish and onions for breakfast in Trinidad. Even forms of greetings are quickly learned, and after a mistake or two, we thrill at the cultural surprises of a vacation abroad. Our response may be merely a shrug and a halfhearted, "Well, when in Rome …," but these are all forms of contextualization to which we learn to adjust when traveling.

Many of you have made the transition from living at home and attending high school to living in a dorm and being away at college. Thinking back on the trials and difficulties, as well as the fun and excitement at times, all this transition required is another example of adjusting to a new culture. Your experience was probably streamlined by the fact that almost all of the people in your college were from your own cultural background, spoke your language, and were undergoing the same stress of adjustment as you. Still, it required an adjustment period and some new patterns of daily living as well. To one degree or another, such changes are required when we change jobs, eat with another family, or begin visiting a church of another denomination. In a new culture it is often difficult to know who is who or what to do without a life program with some explanatory information.

Pastors who are nervous about contextualization are actually involved in it to some degree all the time. When they preach the same message to different audiences, they are contextualizing the message to each setting. They may share Sunday morning's message in the children's sermon, in the preaching hour, to the shut-ins at the nursing home on Monday, and to a youth group on Friday; and every time they share it, the delivery style and perhaps even vocabulary should be nuanced to the particular group.

Contextualization in international settings requires us to consider worldviews, languages, legal matters, and a host of other factors that may require some adjustment to our delivery style. For instance, in countries where Christian church buildings are illegal or worship on Sunday is forbidden, churches may meet in homes on Friday or Saturday. Certainly the language of delivery would not be English in a country that speaks a

different language, but as we have seen, the language is not all that must be adjusted for clear communication.

The biblical basis of contextualization is seen in 1 Corinthians 9:20–23. The apostle Paul stated:

> To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.

Here we see Paul's use of contextualization as well as the limits of such. He says he does it all for the sake of the gospel. If some aspect of your contextualization practices would bring offense or reproach to Christ and his Word, you must not do it. We contextualize so as to be faithful to the gospel while being sensitive enough to the culture as to help them understand it and to understand that they do not have to leave their own culture to embrace another to be saved. Darrell Whiteman recounted hearing a Thai Christian marveling after years of being a Christian and finally learning this truth: "I am realizing that I can be both Christian and Thai."[11]

The controversial aspects of contextualization begin where missionaries disagree on the extent to which they may make the gospel fit in the culture. Some missionaries evangelize Muslims using the Qur'an in the initial stages of evangelism because it speaks of the historical Isa (Jesus) and uses the name Allah to refer to the God of the Bible and because the local language has only that word as the name for God. Christian churches meet on Fridays, with worshippers who wash their face and hands at the door, leave their shoes outside, sit on rugs instead of pews, and call themselves Muslims who follow Jesus. This causes many to become uncomfortable and nervous about overcontextualization.

[11] Darrell L. Whiteman, "Contextualization: The Theory, the Gap, the Challenge," accessed August 28, 2012, http://www.spu.edu/temp/denuol/context.htm.

However, the controversy does not stop there; indeed, it really only begins there.

In recent efforts to advance the kingdom among Muslims, some missionaries have begun referring to themselves as Muslims because the term simply means "one who submits," and they reason that they submit to God. When it is countered that *Muslim* means "one who submits to Allah," they respond that they use the name *Allah* to refer to the God of the Bible, so there is still no problem. Others will even recite the Muslim creed, "There is no God but Allah, and Mohammed is the prophet of Allah," defending this practice with the above argument and adding to it that a prophet is one who speaks *for* God, and Mohammed certainly did, whether they accept everything he said as truly *from* God or not.

While it may not appear so at first, ecclesiology (the doctrine of the church) is crucial to understand and address this point for contextualization. Some have argued that the essence of a church is the social network of relationships in a society. They continue that this social network of relationships is what must not be disrupted if Christianity is ever to make any inroads in the non-Christian areas of the world. One missiologist has said, "The 'church' (i.e. committed community) is already there, they just don't know Jesus yet."[12] Their desire is to add Jesus to the existing religions of such peoples with the belief that this will complete the Muslim adherent.

Although there is certainly reason to be concerned and question some of these practices, we must acknowledge that missionaries of differing opinions champion their particular efforts because they love the Lord and want to see his kingdom advance and not from some sinister plot to undermine and overthrow Christian missions.

How can we clearly communicate the gospel without simply replicating our home church on one hand *or* letting the process go too far on the other? Eugene Nida and David Hesselgrave, among other missionary anthropologists, have suggested a tricultural model of communicating the gospel.[13] This model could also be applied in planting

[12] Tim and Rebecca Lewis, "Planting Churches: Learning the Hard Way," *Mission Frontiers* (January/February 2009), 18.

[13] See David Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 107–8; Eugene Nida, *Message and Mission: The Communication of the Christian Faith*, rev. ed.

churches, training pastors, or living the Christian life before a watching world. After all, Jesus did not call us to take potted plants of churches to other countries but, rather, to plant the pure seed of the gospel in the soil of the target culture and allow the Holy Spirit to grow the plant or tree that he desires to see. The three cultures of the tricultural model of communication are the biblical cultures, the missionary's home culture, and the target people's culture.

The Holy Spirit inspired the Bible to be written through about forty human authors, over about 1,500 years, in at least three languages. Scripture represents many cultures in its pages: Egyptian, Roman, Babylonian, and all those of Asia Minor. The kinds of cultures, languages, styles of literature, and backgrounds of authors and recipients are all crucial to understand for rightly interpreting and applying the Word of God.

Likewise, the missionary must understand his own culture and how it has interpreted and applied God's Word as normative in his home church. Some churches in the United States wash one another's feet when they partake of the Lord's Supper; others do not, but they partake of the Lord's Supper every time they meet. Some Christian women wear a head covering while others do not, but they remain silent in church. Some greet male and female members alike with a holy kiss. All claim biblical warrant for the way they "do church," while others believe certain admonitions were cultural, and today we have different forms to mean the same things.

What a church practices as the proper interpretation and application of any passage is repeated around the world ethnocentrically by its missionaries unless they stop to examine the Bible's meaning and how and why their church has applied the teaching in their context. Indeed, it is not uncommon to see red-brick churches with stained-glass windows and pews in countries where everyone lives in mud huts with thatch roofs.

Paul G. Hiebert recounted the historical pendulum swings of Christianity's approach to contextualization.[14] He related that the early days of the modern missionary movement walked hand in hand with the age of colonialism. As nations staked their

(Pasadena: William Carey Library Publishers, 1990), 52–53.

[14] Paul Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Reflections* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1994), 75–92.

claim on the nations and territories of the world, establishing their rule and footprint in every land, they also established churches. Those nations with a state church—such as the Anglicans of England, Lutherans of Germany, and Catholics of Spain and Portugal—naturally established their churches, seminaries, and clergy in the countries they claimed. They did not study local cultures to understand them, as to be more equipped to persuade people to believe. Existing culture was rather something to be replaced so that civilization, commerce, and Christianity might reign in their "proper" forms. This era was obviously one of noncontextualization.

The second era was an overcorrection to this error. As the social sciences developed and taught the world to understand more about languages and the diverse peoples of the world, an infatuation with cultures began to swing the pendulum back the other way. In the new era the world was enamored with people groups and cultures. Anthropologists believed that if a culture considered certain kinds of murder to be good and culturally appropriate, then it was OK for them to do so, even though the same action would be condemned in another culture. Each culture was studied as a universe to itself; it was considered unjust and unfair to apply one system of ethics or religion equally to all. This extreme pendulum swing carried many into the heresy of pluralism, believing that all religions had equal value.

Hiebert explained that the best approach would be a critical contextualization. In his view many missionaries operated on a surface perception that either allowed or forbade practices that they did not even understand, only to learn later that they had embraced sinful practices while forbidding innocuous aspects. Hiebert presented a simple four-step process that missionaries could follow and find culturally appropriate expressions of Christianity that were faithful to God's Word.[15]

First, he suggests that the missionary study to exegete the culture; i.e., seek to know it and understand what they are doing and why they are doing what they do. Second, study the Word of God, note where God (not your home church necessarily) speaks to some cultural practice as sinful. Third, study the passage in the hermeneutical community of fellow believers and then lead them to see what God says about this practice and

[15] Ibid.

challenge them to face it in light of his Word. Finally, guide them into a new contextualized practice that will serve as a functional substitute for the sinful practice. In this way they will have ownership in the new practice, and it will be seen to be God's Word guiding them and not merely the foreign missionary. When this four-step process is not followed and the missionary simply dictates new practices, Christianity will seem to be a misfit in the target culture and that those within the people group must leave their culture to embrace Christ. When this four-step critical contextualization *is* implemented, the missionary may evangelize, disciple, plant churches, train leaders, and correct sinful patterns in society in effective ways that are faithful to God's Word and sensitive to culture.

CONCLUSION

Just as we began by acknowledging that missionaries *will* learn about the cultures they seek to reach, either by trial and error or careful study, we conclude by reiterating this foundational reality. We should always seek to ensure that Scripture informs culture and not the reverse, but we must carefully examine our own expressions of Christianity in light of the pure teaching of God's Word. When we do, we will likely find extrabiblical, cultural applications we have accepted as normative alongside firm biblical teachings that must not be compromised. Only through a careful and thorough understanding of God's Word, as well as the target culture, can we be sure we do not create unnecessary stumbling blocks to the cross. Jesus became man and walked among us. Paul became as the Jew to the Jew and the Greek to the Greek. Likewise, we must understand and identify with those we seek to reach. By doing so, we will witness more effectively.

RESOURCES FOR FURTHER STUDY

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