

UNIT II: The Cultural Dimensions in World Outreach

-Paul G. Hiebert

The next three lessons could be described as a brief introduction to mission anthropology. Anthropology itself is the study of human beings in an attempt to understand how they think and live. Why do they build houses, wear clothes, speak languages and organize families? How do they create societies and cultures, and how do these, in turn, mold them? And how do people and cultures change? These and many more are the questions anthropologists ask.

They seek the answers by studying people and their environments -- by living with them, observing their behavior, listening to what they say, and sharing in their activities. The results have given us a great many insights into what it means to be human.

Mission anthropology seeks to apply the insights gained by anthropology to the mission task of the Church. In doing so it does not deny that people are spiritual beings. To the contrary, it recognizes that the Bible has a great deal to say about human beings; that they have sinned and need the salvation provided by Jesus Christ, that they should grow in fellowship with God and in harmony with His creation, and that they have an eternal destiny.

But mission anthropology does take the doctrine of the incarnation seriously. For some reason God chose to create people not only divine but also human. Their bodies are subject to natural and biological laws, their minds and spirits operate in accord with psychological and sociocultural principles. In order to understand people, we must recognize both their natural and their spiritual dimensions, and the relationships between these.

Since the spiritual issues in missions are dealt with elsewhere in this course, we will confine ourselves here to some of the insights anthropology can bring to our task.

LESSON 4 -- Culture and Cross-Cultural Differences

OVERVIEW OF THE LESSON: With Lesson 4 we begin a new section of the course. This section is related to the field of mission anthropology. As was said in the text, "Anthropology itself is the study of human beings in an attempt to understand how they think and live." Be sure that in beginning this section you read not only the chapter in the text, but also the introduction to that chapter.

1. Introduction

James says, "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all men generously and without reproach, and it will be given him" (1:5). We need to begin this study with the prayer that God may grant us His wisdom, and lead us into a greater Christlikeness in our life and work.

The purpose of this chapter is to make us aware of cultures. Whether we like it or not, we are all in one. Therefore, the more we know about it and the way it affects us, the more we can choose how to respond to it.

2. a) Read I Corinthinans 8. Note the problem Paul raises regarding the eating of meat offered to idols.
- b) Also read chapter 5 in Crucial Dimensions in World Evangelization.
- c) Now look carefully at the question Paul raises, first from a cultural perspective and then from a theological one. Did Paul feel it was right or wrong, culturally speaking, for the Christians to eat meat offered to idols? What about theologically speaking? _____
Under what circumstances, if ever? _____
Why? _____
- d) Finally, read I Corinthinans 10 and note Paul's approach to the issue.

3. Observe. We need to learn to be aware of what is going on around us. Begin looking around and observing various cultural patterns such as the ways people greet each other, gesture, drive, use objects and eat. A good way to begin is to look at people's clothing and see how it reflects such things as their sex, age, beliefs, occupation and the social occasion. Note here some things which you observed which you hadn't before particularly associated with the word "culture".

4. Participate. One of the best ways of learning what anthropology is all about is to be involved in a simple field research project. Select some ritual you can attend (such as a church service, preferably in a denomination other than your own; a marriage, a funeral; or even a football game). Take detailed notes on the cultural forms such as the objects used, the relationships and the uses of time and space. If possible find out the meanings and values these have by talking to someone involved and associated with the ritual. Write up a brief summary, and try to explain to the reader what was going on, and then why the people seem to become involved in the rite. Write this summary (200-300 words) on a separate sheet of paper and attach it to this lesson.

Look over the main points of the chapter again before you take the trial test and then the examination. You may check your answers to the trial test on page 4-3 .

5. Suggested further research (not required for the course): A great deal of information has been published on most of the world's cultures. If you are planning to go to a particular part of the world, or are interested in it, check out books and articles dealing with the cultures of the people living

there. You can learn a great deal about a culture before you ever get there.

6. Self-examination

- a. What is the anthropological meaning of the word "culture"?
- b. What is ethnocentrism?
- c. Why is it very difficult to translate a message into another language?
- d. What do we mean, anthropologically speaking, by "symbol" and "world view"?
- e. Explain the difference between syncretism and indigenization.

Answers to self-examination

- a. "Culture" is defined as "the integrated system of learned patterns of behavior, ideas and products characteristic of a society." (p. 43)
- b. "Ethnocentrism" is the tendency of people to judge other cultures by the values and assumptions of their own culture. (p. 53).
- c. It is difficult to translate a message into another language because it is necessary to preserve the original meaning even though the cultural forms may be quite different. This means that the original message must be thoroughly understood, and also that the recipient culture must be thoroughly understood. Often the same forms may have quite different meanings (see the example in the text of kissing).
- d. The essential characteristic of a symbol is the assigning of a meaning to a form which can be experienced. (p. 47). (Thus the form of the symbol is not what is of highest priority, but the meaning of that symbol.) The same symbol (form) may occur in many different cultures, and have widely varying meanings in each one.
- e. The difference between indigenization and syncretism is that in indigenization the original meanings are put in new cultural forms, but the meaning remains the same. In syncretism, these meanings are mixed with ideas already in the culture to the point that the original meaning is lost, and thus the message is not the same. (p. 58)

LESSON 5 -- Social Structure and Church Growth

OVERVIEW OF THE LESSON: In our last lesson we learned basic anthropological terminology and began to think in terms of anthropological concepts. In this lesson we will concentrate on the structure of interpersonal relationships--how individuals relate to each other and how they organize into larger groups. Then, as in the last chapter, we will see how this relates to the Christian mission.

1. Introduction

It is easy to see that in a missionary situation there have to be bridges built between individuals of one culture to those of another. Do there also have to be bridges built between the social structures of the two different cultures? Does the organization of the secular (foreign) society affect the organizational structure of the Christian movement in that society? These are some of the questions we want to ponder as we study this lesson.

2. Read:

Read Acts 15:1-35. Notice the issue facing the early church regarding the admission of Gentiles. Now read chapter 6 in Crucial Dimensions in World Evangelization. Review the situation in Acts using the concepts and viewpoints presented in the chapter of the text.

3. Answer the following questions on what you have read:

a. What were the social dynamics involved in the Jerusalem conference and the question of admitting Gentiles? _____

b. In your estimation, why is this conference at Jerusalem one of the pivotal chapters in the New Testament as it relates to the advance

of Christianity_____

c. Why is it important to understand the status or role of a person within a given society?_____

d. Is it necessary for a missionary to identify with the people? To what extent?_____

e. What mission model has had the least trouble with indigenizing the work and transferring responsibility to the nationals?_____

f. Give an example of how the organization of a society as a whole can affect the presentation of the gospel in that society?_____

3. Observe. Begin observing the structure of interpersonal relationships occurring around you. As you watch two individuals talking, ignore what they are saying and look at how they say it, and how they are relating to each other. What type of behavior is expected of each of them at that moment? Is either of them deviating from the expected behavior, and, if so, why? Write a short paragraph on what you have observed.

Your comments:

When you are in a group situation, observe the dynamics of leadership, of the uses of resources and what the goals and beliefs of the group are. Comment here on some of your observations:

4. Research:

- a. Make an organization chart of your home church or mission organization. Note the various groups and roles and how they relate to each other. In the case of missions, look particularly at how missionary-national relationships are structures.

Your chart:

b. Next analyze the structure of relationships between members of the church or mission organization and outsiders. How do members view outsiders? _____

How do they relate to new members who join? _____

c. Finally, analyze the informal group dynamics of the organization. How do cliques, alliances, class and ethnic distinctions, and personality differences affect the working of the formal organization? _____

5. Review: Look over the chapter again briefly and then test yourself by taking the following self-examination, checking your answers against those on the page following.

Self-examination:

1. What do anthropologists mean by the concept "social structure"?
2. What is meant by the word "status"?
3. What is the basic issue in identification?
4. What is meant by the term "people movements"?
5. Why is the Jerusalem Council important for missionary strategy and the history of the expansion of the Christian movement?

Answers to self-examination:

1. Social structures are the ways in which people organize their relationships with one another to form groups, institutions and societies. (p. 61)
2. Status is the "position in a social system occupied by individuals and associated with certain behavior expectations." (p. 62)
3. The basic issue in identification is the inner feelings and mental maps. Does the missionary, for example, react like a national would under those circumstances? It is a sense of oneness more than formal equivalence. (pp. 66-67)
4. "People movements" is the term missiologists use to refer to movements in which people come to Christ on the basis of group decisions or by sharing the gospel through caste and kinship ties so that the relational group announce their decision together. (p. 74)
5. The Jerusalem Council freed Christianity from the ethnic structures of Judaism, making it possible for Gentiles to become Christians without becoming first Jews, and thus made it possible for Christianity to become truly international and to spread all over the Roman empire and beyond at a rapid pace. (Text, p. 35, #2 of Workbook section on this chapter).

LESSON 6 -- Holism and the Integrated Christian Life

OVERVIEW OF THE LESSON: The aim of this chapter is to make us aware of the ways in which different areas of life interact and affect a person. Hopefully, it can help us to better understand ourselves and our own responses.

1. Read I Kings 19:1-8. Had you been there, what council would you have given Elijah when he fell into despair so shortly after his spiritual victory over the prophets of Baal? _____

2. Read chapter 7 of Crucial Dimensions in World Evangelization. Now analyze the story of Elijah again, noting the psychological, physiological, social and religious factors that affected his despondency. _____

What was the kind of counsel God gave him when he was in that state?

3. Observe: Reflect on how such factors as your health, economic condition, a quarrel with a friend or spouse, and an unexpected crisis affects your relationship to God in your devotions. On the other hand, how do your devotions affect your attitude towards others and your work, or change the way you relate to others? Think on this, but you do not need to comment here.

4. Research: One of the biggest problems facing a missionary is how to raise and educate his children. Look at the possible alternatives such as a) leaving them in their home country with relatives, b) sending them away to special schools for missionary children, c) raising them at home and teaching them by means of a correspondence course, or d) letting them attend the local schools and become part of the local culture. Note how each of these might affect the child's health, psychological adjustment, social identification, and religious commitment. Why is it that so many "missionary kids" end up maladjusted and outside of the church? If you like you may write a brief paragraph here, but it is not required.

(Optional)

5. Carry on: This is only a brief exposure to the much larger field of mission anthropology. If you wish to pursue the topic further, browse in some of the following books:

Nida, E. A. Customs and Cultures: Anthropology for Christian Missions

Smalley, W. A. Readings in Missionary Anthropology.

Loewen, J. A. Culture and Human Values: Christian Intervention in Anthropological Perspective.

These three books are all available from the Church Growth Book Club (533 Hermosa St., South Pasadena, Ca. 91030) at a discount.

For further exploration, refer to

Hall, E. T., The Silent Language.

Hiebert, P. G. Cultural Anthropology.

Self-examination

Before taking the examination for this chapter, do this trial exam, checking your answers with those on the next page.

1. Define the following terms:
 - a. multiple model approach
 - b. stratigraphic approach
 - c. reductionism
 - d. holistic approach to culture
 - e. norm
2. What is the significance to missions of a holistic approach to culture?
3. Why do we need a theology of the universe, of humanness, and of culture?

Answers to self-examination

1. a. This is the approach which looks at the individual as a being with physical, biological, psychological and spiritual needs and desires. (p. 75)
 - b. The stratigraphic approach is an approach which simply stacks up the various models (physical, biological, etc.) without relating them to each other in an integrated way. (p. 77)
 - c. Reductionism attempts to interpret all observations of human models by reducing them to a single level of analysis (e.g., all human behavior is explained in biological terms only, or spiritual terms, only, etc.). (p. 77)
 - d. The holistic approach to culture views culture as made up of a number of interrelated systems (economic, social organization, politics, aesthetics, religion and ideology). (p. 79)
 - e. A norm is a belief within a society which defines what is and what is not permissible by that society. (p. 80)
2. Because other societies do not have the dichotomy between the natural and the spiritual world that we have, they hear something different from what our message is intended to impart. Therefore, it is important that missionaries look at the whole of culture in an integrated way and understand the world view of the other culture. Furthermore, because missionaries seek to introduce change into culture, they should be aware that these changes can have side effects in other (non-religious) areas of that culture. (p. 81)
3. Holism implies that we must have a theology of the universe, of humanness, and of culture. We cannot deal with man in his culture without having a theology of the universe (to know how to relate to his world view) and a theology of humanness (to know how to relate to him as an individual) and a theology of culture (to be able to understand the cause and effect of his society upon him and of him on his society). (pp. 81-86)