

Mission Issues of the 80's: The Gospel and Cultural Variance

MISSION ISSUES OF THE 80's: THE GOSPEL AND CULTURAL VARIANCE

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As a basis for our reflections, I would like to turn to Acts 14:27-15:11. Somehow we live with the illusion that we face problems none has ever faced before, that we have insights that nobody has ever had before. But when we go back to history, we often find others who have faced these problems and we are amazed at their insights. Such is the case with our text today.

Paul and Barnabas returned from their missionary journey. They called the congregation together and reported all that God had done - how he had thrown open the gates of faith to the Gentiles. Then certain persons came from Judaea and began to object to the missionary methods Paul and Barnabas were using. Gentiles had to be circumcised and become Jews before they could become Christians, they said. The result was a fierce controversy, so they all took the matter to the apostles in Jerusalem. There Paul and Barnabas reported all that God had done through them, but members of the Judaistic party opposed them. We know the end of the story. The first great church conference was a missions conference that arose out of the problems of success. When too many strangers come into the church, the old members are often upset. But here there was another problem added to this - the strangers came from another cultural and religious background. How were they to be incorporated into the church? This raised the fundamental question, what is the Gospel and how does it relate to culture.

THE CONCEPT OF THE CHURCH *WELM*

Before we examine the relationship of Gospel to culture, we need to look briefly at the concept of "Culture". In the popular sense the word refers to the behavior of the upper class elite. For example, we say a person is cultured if he or she listens to Bach, Beethoven and Brahms, or knows when to use the two knives, three forks and five spoons at a formal dinner. Here we will use culture in the more technical sense, as it is used in the social sciences. For our purposes we will define it as "the integrated system of learned patterns of ideas, behavior and products characteristic of a society."

Let us look a little more in detail at some of the parts of this definition. Notice first that we begin by observing "behavior and products." These are what we can see. For example, we notice that Americans, when they meet one another, often grasp each others paws - in other words, they shake hands. In India the people press their palms together and bow their heads, in Alaska they rub noses, and in one tribe in South America they spit on each other's chests. We are interested here not in all human behavior, but in that behavior that "patterned" - in that which is repeated in certain situations, in that which is expected of people.

Another important word in the definition is that of "ideas". Behind human behavior lies ideas. These we cannot see. We must infer them from the people's behavior and products. In fact, behavior and products are

important precisely because they are linked to ideas. A hand shake, for example, carries with it a great deal of meaning. To omit it also carries a message. This linkage of ideas to visible forms is the basis for what we call "symbols". Words, bells, signs, gestures, dress, houses, colors- these and many more are the symbols that make up a culture. In one sense a culture is made up of different systems to symbols by which humans express and communicate their ideas.

Culture is "characteristic of a society", in other words, it is shared by a community of people. It enables them to relate to each other and to build a common society. On the otherhand, culture often sets one group of people off from another. It is both a bridge and a barrier to communication and interaction.

Finally, culture is a "integrated system". It is not an odd assortment of customs and ideas. The various parts fit together into a single whole. On the surface there are a wide diversity of behavior patterns and ideas. Behind these are found a few basic assumptions about the nature of reality and about what is right and what is wrong. Because these assumptions are taken for granted we are often not conscious of their existence. Only when they are challenged are we aware that they are fundamental to our beliefs and practices.

This concept of integration is so important we need to explore it further. We can do so by way of illustration. Have you noticed when Americans come to a meeting, the first thing they do is find themselves a platform on which to perch themselves? This is clearly a pattern for wherever Americans go; they look around for some raised platform on which to sit: a chair, a bench, a stool or a rock. In our homes we spend a great deal of money on buying couches and chairs. Not only that, when Americans lie down they must have a bed that keeps them off the floor. When we go to Europe on a trip, we make two types of reservations - air reservations for travel, and hotel reservations sothat we will have a place to sleep when night comes. We panic when night comes and we have not place to lie down. Indians, on the other hand, know that all one needs for a good night's rest is a blanket to keep clean and warm, and a flat place, and there are many flat places in the world - park lawns, railroad platforms, sidewalks and so on. Moreover Americans are generally embarrassed to sleep in public. We drive an added hundred miles and pay \$40 to spend five hours in the privacy of a motel room.

Why this obession with getting off the floor? Behind our behavior lies a deep level assumption that "the floor is dirty". Because of this we keep off the floor. We sit on chairs, we sleep on beds and put our children in play pens. We also keep our shoes on in the house because the floor is already dirty. We are shocked when our children pick up food that has dropped on the floor and put it in their mouths. We could, as the Japanese do, begin with the assumption that "the floor is clean". If we did so we would take our shoes off at the door. We would sit on mats on the floor, and sleep on the floor. And we would keep our floor as clean as Westerners keep their couches and chairs.

At the core, cultures are ways of looking at the world (Figure 1). Each culture tells its people what exists, what is important, and how to order the universe. On the surface, there is a great deal of variance from culture to culture, but this variance only reflects a much more profound difference at

the level of the basic assumptions about the nature of reality and of righteousness. As Edward Sapir has said, the worlds people live in are not the same world with different labels attached, but in fact, different worlds." It is this difference in the most fundamental assumptions and beliefs between different peoples that raises one of the most profound questions facing modern Christian missions today, namely what is the Gospel and how can it be expressed within the diversity of human culture.

PROBLEMS CREATED BY CULTURAL VARIANCE

By definition, missions involves the communication of the Gospel across cross-cultural lines. Missionaries need preparation in three areas. First they must have a firm grounding in the Scriptures and in the message of the Gospel. Second, they must develop the gifts and skills they will use in their ministry, whether that be preaching, teaching, healing, administration or some other task. Finally, they must be trained to deal with the problems created by moving from one culture to another. So long as the church ministers to people within one culture, the cultural issue can be largely ignored. People naturally speak the same language, and accept each other's cultural assumptions. The danger is, of course, that we come to equate the Gospel with our culture.

But when we move across cultures, there are a number significant issues that arise. Unless we are aware of these, and able to deal with them effectively, our ministries will be weakened. What are some of the major problems raised by going from one culture to another in order to proclaim the Gospel?

Culture Shock: The first is "culture shock." When people move to another culture, they undergo a series of intellectual and emotional responses that is best characterized by the term "shock". This is not the feeling of revulsion that arises from seeing what they consider to be filth or disease first hand. It is a response all people experience in varying degrees when they cross cultural lines. Indians coming to the U.S. experience it just as much as we do when we go to India. As Dr. J.B. Toews well knows from the Seminary, after Indian students have been in the U.S. about two or three weeks they begin to long for "real food". They are excited about being in America, and are enjoying the new experiences, but somehow they cannot get good food. All that is available is snacks like hamburgers, steak, roast beef (considered a very low status food in India), and vegetables. For South Indians to be a meal there must be rice.

Culture shock follows a typical cycle (See Figure 2). There is real excitement when you are officially appointed to serve as a missionary. You have been looking forward to this for years, and now it is becoming true. The level of satisfaction rises at your farewell. Now you are seated on the platform with all the other important persons. You can hardly believe that this is really happening to you. There is even greater excitement at the send-off at the airport. For the first time you realize that it will really take place - you are going to be a missionary!

You are still excited, though a little tired, as you land in Nairobi, or Kinshasa, or Hyderabad. The new sights and sounds, the realization that you have finally arrived gives you a lift that overcomes the weariness of the journey. There is a little let down when you sit down to your first meal

and recognize only half of the things on your plate. Certainly you will be able to cook decent food once you set up your own household. You are further annoyed when you go to the market place to purchase a few oranges. No one speaks English so you end up making a fool out of yourself by pointing to the orange, then to your mouth and gesturing that you would like to buy the fruit. The little children that have swarmed around are laughing and making fun of you. Here you are, obviously an adult, wealthy and well educated and you still can't speak Swahili or Telugu. Any child of five in the circle can speak circles around you. Then you get a stomach ache and when they take you to the doctor, he is black. Suddenly you wonder whether or not he is a witch doctor. You had never thought about it before, but what are you going to do when you get sick in this new country. Should you fly back to New York? A few weeks later you sit on the edge of your bed, faced with the tough job of learning a new language, or trying to understand what is going on around you, and of realizing that it will be a long time before you can make any real contribution to the missionary task. And the implications begin to dawn on you of the fact that you have committed your life to serve in this land.

Culture shock is not primarily the shock of experiencing new and strange experiences. It is much deeper than that. It is the feeling of total disorientation that occurs when you find all your own cultural rules no longer work. You must begin again as a child and learn how to live in this new world. You realized you must learn a new language. But you did not realize that you would have to relearn your gestures, your use of time, how close you stand to other people, the way you relate to people, in fact the very way in which you see the world. Tourists normally do not face this shock to any real extent. They go out to see the strange sights, but when they begin to enter shock, they return to a little piece of their own culture in the land - the Hilton Hotel. The next day they can go out again to see the sights. But they realize that they can always go home. Culture shock sets in when you begin to realize that this is my home.

The first symptom of culture shock is depression. The language looks impossible to learn. The people all look alike, and you can never remember their names. Another symptom is an obsession with cleanliness and health. Excessive care is taken with food and water, and worry sets in with every slight pain or fever.

The result of shock is often the temptation to return "home" - to write a letter of resignation. The only thing that keeps you there is the fact you can't afford to go back. What will the people say if I return so soon after such a great farewell?

It is here that the older missionaries need to be an older brother or sister to the newcomers, to put an arm around their shoulders and say, "Why don't you think about it for a week and then mail that letter of resignation." During the week there is usually some bright moment and the letter will be thrown into the waste basket. There will be other letters, but they too will find their end in the same basket. Every missionary at some time or the other has mentally written that letter. The danger for the old timer is to forget what it was like that first year.

In the normal course of life the new missionary learns how to say a few words in Swahili, how to buy oranges and know what value the coins have, how to get on and off a bus without fear of being lost forever going around in circles, and how to relate to people. They learn that not all Africans and Indians look exactly alike. They learn to like the food, and many of the cultural values. And in time they reach a measure of adjustment and satisfaction in living in the new culture. They now know the language, and the many cultural signs and customs. They have friends among the people, and begin to feel at home.

There are some profound changes taking place during this period of culture shock. There is more going on than simply learning a new language and culture. For one, the new candidate is becoming bonded to the new culture, and the nature of that bond will affect the way they relate to that culture for most or all of their lives. By bonding, we mean that they form a set of fundamental attitudes and relational patterns to that culture. If they have a positive experience during the bonding period, they will learn to appreciate and love the culture and its people. If the experience is negative, they may never return, or they will always remain at a distance from the people and try to reconstruct little Americas in which to withdraw.

Normally, new missionaries are bonded first to the missionary culture. They are taken to the mission compound and there spend their primary time with other missionaries, learning the traditional views of the people and their culture. It is not surprising, then that many missionaries find it hard to live close to the people. They are under the impression that this is impossible.

We are currently experimenting with a program run by Tom and Betty Brewster to bond the new candidates to the people directly. The students are taken to a country and within a few days are placed in the homes of the local people. This enables them to bond directly to the people and culture in an incarnational approach to the missionary role. We might expect that making so great a transition might cause deep and permanently damaging culture shock. But we find to the contrary that the candidates have little idea what to really expect and are anticipating a major change - even looking forward to it as an evidence of their entering the missionary task. Moreover, given the proper tools for learning the language and culture, the whole experience can be made an exciting time of exploration and learning, and the severity of the shock can be lessened. The positive benefit is that the missionaries now know about the people they serve, and can identify closely with them.

A second change that takes place during the period of culture shock is a philosophical reorientation. Most people are mono-cultural. They grow up in a single culture, and have never had to face another culture. When they have had to do so, they generally think of the others as "primitive" or "backward" and so these cultures can be discounted and ignored. Now, often for the first time, the missionary has come into another culture, and has had to recognize that it provides a viable and rational organization of the world and life. They begin to realize that there are other philosophical systems, and religions, that make sense to the people who follow them. The missionary is faced with the problem of pluralism. On one level this means showing respect to cultures and people quite different from him or herself, even if he or she does not agree with

them. On another level, the missionary can no longer count on using his or her own culture as the criterion to evaluate other cultures. But - what then is the measure for evaluating what is good and evil within a culture, or true and false within philosophies and religions?

There are ways to help young missionaries to cope with culture shock. It can be minimized, and used for constructive purposes. But we must be aware of it.

Culture shock comes to an end as the person adapts to the new culture. The nature of that adaptation varies, and determines to a great deal the effectiveness of the missionary in the country. Some try to preserve their American cultures, and live in ghettos. Others are able to identify more closely with the people. None can go completely "native". We can never erase the imprint of our first culture. But to the extent we can identify with the people, we will be effective in our witness to them.

Identification at the core means more than adopting native dress, language and food. We can adopt the local customs and still have deep within us an attitude of distance and superiority over the people. Identification must begin by first dealing with our attitudes, but learning to love the people as they are. To love them means that we enjoy being with them, and we want to know more about them. Once we have dealt with our attitudes to the people, identification on the level of dress and behavior will follow naturally. Belief in our witness depends on trust, and depends on mutual understanding, respect and love.

One more thing should be said about culture shock. When missionaries return to their home country, they go through "reverse culture shock." They return with high expectations of being able to fit right back into the life they left. But they are no longer the same. Their interests and values have altered. When they meet relatives and friends, they find little common ground for relating. After listening to the missionary for an hour, the others turn away bored with international matters. What is important to them are the local affairs. In the end, the missionary often finds himself closest to other bi-cultural people who have lived in other cultures and gone through the philosophical shift of culture shock.

Misunderstandings: A second problem created by cultural variety is that of misunderstanding. When we go to another society we assume that basically they think like we do. They may speak a different language, but in other areas they must be like us. So we act according to our own cultural patterns. The result is often confusion and misunderstanding that leads to distrust. And we may not be aware of what is really going on because many times the cultural patterns we use are implicit. We take them for granted and are not even aware of them.

An example here can help us to understand the confusion that may arise. In Arabia an American might arrange to meet a national businessman at ten o'clock the next day. In America a person is "on time" so long as he appears from five minutes after the set time. If a person shows up quarter hour after that time, he is "late" and must mumble an apology. If he arrives more than a half hour after the set time, he is very late and must give a full apology. One hour after the set time is unforgiveable.

Arabs look at time differently. (See Figure 3). Only servants are expected to show up at the set time - evidence that they are in fact servants and must obey.

An equal does not show up until the "right time" which is about an hour after the set time. This shows that he comes when he is ready. Consequently, in traditional Arabia, when two business men agreed to meet at ten, both showed up at about eleven. Both were following the same sets of cultural rules regarding time.

Misunderstanding arises when an Arab meets an American. They agree to meet at ten the next day. The American arrives at ten - right on time for an American. The Arab businessman does not want to be seen as a servant and so he shows up at eleven - the right time for an Arab. Meanwhile, not understanding what going on, the American judges the Arab as lazy, indifferent or uncivilized. To top it all, the Arab didn't even offer an apology. The American may even feel that if the Arabs had a "sense of time" they would be more efficient and as advanced as the Americans. The Arab, on the other hand, is confused. The American shows up like any servant at the stated time. He has no self-respect and sense of honor. The confusion arises because neither understands the other, or, in fact, is consciously aware of his own cultural rules.

While confusion over time can create some problems in interpersonal relationships, some misunderstandings can create serious problems in the communication of the Gospel. For example, let us look at the concept of "life". In the West we divide life up into several different types (See Figure 4). We tend to lump together God, angels and demons as "supernatural beings". Then we have a category of "human beings". Then we have categories for "animals", and "plants". Finally we have inanimate matter. We think of each of these kinds of life as being quite different from the others. Supernatural beings reside in other worlds, whether heaven or hell. Humans are different from animals for we can eat and enslave the latter but not the former. Animals are different from plants for animals eat plants and are mobile. Finally, matter is distinct for it has no life.

Indians perceive life in quite a different way. One of the fundamental doctrines of Hinduism is eka jivam, or there is only one kind of life. The same kind of life found in the gods and demons is also found in humans, animals, plants, and possibly even matter. To be sure, the gods and demons have more of it, but they are not qualitatively different from those that have less life than they. Consequently, great humans are thought to be like lesser gods, and animals cannot be killed for that would be murder. It is not surprising, therefore, that orthodox Hindus are vegetarians.

Unless both Americans and Indians are aware of the different connotations they have for the word "life", they will misunderstand one another. Each will assume that the other has his or her view of "life". Both will be confused by an uneasy feeling that in fact something is wrong in their communication, but neither knows exactly why.

Far more serious is the problem of translating the Scriptures from one language to another. For instance, in translating "In the beginning God..." (Genesis 1:1), what Telugu word does one use? In the past, unaware of the fundamental assumptions that lie behind the different words, Bible translators used the term devudu. But a careful analysis shows that this word fits into the general Indian view of life - that in fact it speaks of a god that is not basically different from humans, a god that sins and can be reborn as an ant or animal because of it. Furthermore, such gods come to earth frequently in "incarnations"