

There was a time in the history of man . . . when the barriers between the earth's peoples seemed to be mainly physical. The problem was one of transporting men, messages, and material goods across treacherous seas, towering mountains, and trackless deserts. Missionaries knew all too well how formidable those challenges were. Today, thanks to jumbo jets, giant ocean vessels, and towering antennae, those earlier problems have been largely resolved. We can deliver a man, or a Bible, or a sewing machine anywhere on the face of the earth within a matter of hours, and we can transmit a sound or a picture within seconds. This does not end the matter however. To quote Robert Park:

One can transport words across cultural boundaries (like bricks) but interpretation will depend on the context which their different interpreters bring to them. And that context will depend more on past experience and present temper of the people to whom the words are addressed than on the good will of the persons who report them.¹

Park goes on to assert that the traits of material culture are more easily diffused than those of nonmaterial culture. He illustrates his point by citing the example of the African chief whose immediate response upon seeing a plow in operation was, "It's worth as much as ten wives!" One wonders how much prayer and how many hours of study and patient instruction would have been necessary to convince that chief that Christ is infinitely more valuable than plows, or wives, or fetishes and false gods. Yes, the barriers are, after all, very real and challenging. But they are no longer essentially physical—if, indeed, they ever were.

Cultural Barriers to Missionary Communication

There is a very real danger that, as our technology advances and enables us to cross geographical and national boundaries with singular ease and increas-

The Role of Culture in Communication

by David J. Hesselgrave

ing frequency, we may forget that *it is the cultural barriers which are the most formidable*. The gap between our technological advances and our communication skills is perhaps one of the most challenging aspects of modern civilization. Western diplomats are beginning to realize that they need much more than a knowledge of their message and a good interpreter or English-speaking national. Many educators and missionaries have come to the position that cross-cultural communication is a *sine qua non* for citizenship in this new world. . . .

Importance of Culture

Unfortunately, intercultural communication is as complex as the sum total of human differences. The word culture is a very inclusive term. It takes into account linguistic, political, economic, social, psychological, religious, national, racial, and other differences. Communication reflects all these differences, for, as Clyde Kluckhohn says, "Culture is a way of thinking, feeling, believing. It is the group's knowledge stored up for future use."² Or, as Louis Luzbetak writes:

Culture is a design for living. It is a *plan according to which society adapts itself to its physical, social, and ideational environment*. A plan for coping with the physical environment would include such matters as food production and all technological knowledge and skill. Political systems, kinships and family organization, and law are examples of social adaptation, a plan according to which one is to interact with his fellows. Man copes with his ideational environment through knowledge, art, magic, science, philosophy, and religion. Cultures are

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but different answers to essentially the same human problems.³

Missionaries must come to an even greater realization of the importance of culture in communicating Christ. In the final analysis, they can effectively communicate to the people of any given culture to the extent that they understand that culture, language being but one aspect of culture. Before missionaries go to another country the first time, they tend to think primarily of the great distance they must travel to get to their field of labor. . . . But once they arrive they stand face-to-face with the people of their respondent culture and are unable to communicate the most simple message. Ask experienced missionaries about their frustrating experiences on the field and most of them will respond by telling of their problems in communication.

Missionaries should prepare for this frustration. They have been preoccupied with their message. By believing it they were saved. By studying it they have been strengthened. Now they want to preach it to those who have not heard it, for that is a great part of what it means to be a missionary. But before they can do so effectively, they must study again—not just the language, but also the audience. They must learn before they can teach, and listen before they can speak. They need to know the message for the world, but also the world in which the message must be communicated.

Ambassador of God’s Message

Eugene Nida of the American Bible Society has made important contributions toward an understanding of the communication problems of the missionary. The discussion and diagram in his chapter on “Structure of Communication” furnish the basis for our consideration of a three culture model of missionary communication.⁴ . . .

As communicator, the missionary stands on middle ground and looks in two directions. In the first place, he looks to the Scriptures. The message is not really his. He did not originate it. He was not there when it was first given. His own words are not inspired in the biblical sense. He cannot say as could the apostle:

What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we beheld and our hands handled, concerning the Word of life—and the life was manifested and we have seen and bear witness and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was manifested to us (1 John 1:1-2).

He knows that he must be diligent to present himself “approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15). He knows that he must study and obey the Word of God. He is aware that there are some very solemn warnings to be absolutely faithful to that original message:

I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God shall add to him the plagues which are written in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the tree of life and from the holy city, which are written in this book (Rev. 22:18-19).

In summary, in relationship to the biblical message, the missionary is simply a messenger, an ambassador—a secondary, never a primary source.

In the second place, when the missionary lifts up his eyes and looks to the fields, he sees people—millions of them—who need the message. If only they could understand their real need. If only their worship were directed to the true God. If only their faith were to be placed in the one Savior and Lord. If only they could be reached, instructed, and persuaded to repent. It is these of whom his Lord spoke when He said: “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and in earth. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you” (Matt. 28:18-20). But looking at his respondent culture, he realizes that he will never be an indigenous source. The language of that culture will always have an element of strangeness. That culture will always be his *adopted culture*, never his *native culture*.

Three Cultures Interacting

It is this intermediate position, this looking in two directions, that constitutes the special challenge and unusual opportunity of the missionary as an ambassador of Christ. It is a special challenge because of the comprehensive and demanding nature of the task. It is an unusual opportunity because it means giving the one needful message to those who have not understood or believed it.

Let's take another look at what is involved from the perspective of communication. At the primary level the missionary message is the message of the Bible. It was given by God through the apostles and prophets in the languages and cultural contexts of the Bible. For the sake of simplification, we will say that Bible culture includes all cultural contexts in which the message of the Bible was originally given, whether Judah at the time of Ezra, Jerusalem at the time of Christ, or Athens at the time of Paul. In those cultural contexts there were sources (Ezra, our Lord Christ, or Paul), messages and respondents. The sources of the messages were identified with the cultures we have labeled Bible culture. They encoded the messages in forms that were understandable in those cultures to respondents who were members of those cultures.

At the secondary level, the missionary is a citizen of a quite different culture, whether his home address is in London, Chicago, or even Tokyo. He has been brought up in his own culture and has been schooled in its language worldview, and value system. He has received the Christian message in the context of culture as it was communicated by a source (or sources) who most likely was a citizen of the culture. We will label that culture the missionary's culture.

At the tertiary level, there are people in still another culture with its own sources, messages, and respondents. We will label this third culture the respondent culture (and, occasionally, the target culture). In relationship to this respondent culture the missionary has immediate and ultimate objectives. First, he desires to communicate Christ in such a way that the people will understand, repent, and believe the gospel. Second, he wants to commit the message to "faithful men who will be able to teach others" (2 Tim. 2:2), in culturally relevant terms that only they, in the final analysis, can command.

Bible Culture Context

The missionary task can now be seen in clearer perspective. Starting from the missionary's culture, cultural boundaries must be traversed in two directions. The missionary's first responsibility is to study the Scriptures, in the original languages if possible, but always in terms of the Bible culture context. Any sound system of hermeneutics must take into account the cultural context in which the message was originally communicated, the background and syntax and style, the characteristics of the audience, and the special circumstances in which the message was given. This process is essential to Bible exegesis. The important thing, after all, is not what the Bible reader or interpreter feels the meaning to be; the important thing is what the source intended that his respondents should understand by his message. The Bible interpreter is constantly tempted to project the meanings of his own cultural background into the exegetical process, with the result that the original meaning is missed or perverted. This temptation is heightened by the fact that, for the most part, all of us learn our own culture quite unconsciously and uncritically. Therefore, there is the ever-present tendency to generalize from our own experience.

Most Bible readers and interpreters will find sufficient reason for confessing to their weakness in this area. For example, a friend of mine recently joined a tour group in Palestine. While walking under a tree in the Jordan Valley, the guide reached up, picked some fruit, peeled away the husk and ate the fruit. As he did so, he turned to the group and said, "According to the Bible, John the Baptist's diet consisted of this fruit and wild honey. This is the locust." Almost to a person the members of the group expressed astonishment. They had always supposed that the locusts mentioned in Matthew and Mark were grasshoppers. As a matter of fact, they probably were correct. The point is that they had not thought of this second possibility because in their own culture grasshopper locusts are prevalent while locustfruit is not.

Another example of this tendency to interpret the Word of God through cultural glasses is related to the King James Version's translation of our Lord's instructions to His disciples at the Passover meal: "Drink ye all of it" (Matt. 26:27 KJV). Perhaps

most Protestant congregations in America (and not a few ministers) understand this to mean that all the wine is to be consumed, though little significance is attached to the phrase, in view of the fact that the elements usually come in such minuscule proportions that consuming all is not a very challenging task. How much more significant is the original meaning, which properly translated would be: “Drink from it, all of you” (NASB), or “All of you drink some of it” (WILLIAMS). Two facts of American culture militate against this original meaning, however. First, most of us do not drink from a common cup in the manner to which the disciples were accustomed. And second, the syntax of the English language as spoken by most Americans makes it unlikely that they will decode the message in accordance with the original meaning.

Respondent Culture Context

Proper exegesis, however, is but the beginning of missionary responsibility. The missionary must now look in another direction—the direction of the respondent culture, with its own worldview, value system, and codes of communication. He must remember that respondents in that culture have imbibed as deeply of its particular ideas and values as he has of his. It is likely that they will be more ignorant of the Bible culture than non-Christian members of the missionary’s culture are. Further, they will exhibit the same tendency to generalize and project their own cultural understandings into the message of the Bible culture. The missionary task, therefore, is to properly exegete (decode) the biblical message. With minimal intrusion of his own cultural understanding, he must encode the message in a culturally relevant form in the target culture so that the respondents will understand as much as possible of the original message. This is not the simple task that many have supposed. Consider what is involved in translating Revelation 3:20 in terms which are meaningful to the Zanaki people.

One cannot say to the Zanaki people along the winding shores of sprawling Lake Victoria, “Behold, I stand at the door and knock” (Rev. 3:20). This would mean that Christ was declaring Himself to be a thief. In their experience

thieves generally make it a practice to knock on the door of a hut which they hope to burglarize; if they hear any movement or noise inside, they dash off into the dark. An honest man will come to a house and call the name of the person inside, in this way identifying himself by his voice. Accordingly, in the Zanaki translation it is necessary to say, “Behold, I stand at the door and call.” This wording may be slightly strange to us, but the meaning is the same. In each case, Christ is asking people to open the door. He is no thief and He will not force an entrance; He knocks, and in Zanaki “He calls.” If anything, the Zanaki expression is a little more personal than our own.⁵

Or, consider the strangeness of the phrase “devours widows’ houses” in a still different respondent culture.

To understand a strange culture one must enter as much as possible into the very life and viewpoint of the native people. Otherwise, a person will not realize how ridiculous it is to talk to Indians of southern Mexico about scribes who “devour widows’ houses” (Mark 12:40). Their houses are often made with cornstalk walls and grass roofs, and farm animals do eat them when fodder gets scarce, so that people guard against hungry cows breaking in to eat down a house. “Devouring widows’ houses” is no bold metaphor but a real danger. The native reader wonders, “What were these ‘scribes’ anyway? Is this just a name for starved, ravenous cattle?” In such cases one must translate “destroy widows’ houses.”⁶

Replicating Concern for Missions in the Respondent Culture

There remains still another important aspect of missionary communication. We said that the ultimate goal of the missionary is to raise up effective sources of the Christian message from within the target culture. Missionary communication that does not keep this goal in mind is myopic. The world mission of the church has been greatly weakened by lack of vision at this point. It is not so much that missionaries have been remiss in encouraging the emergence of Christian leadership in the

Third World. But it has been all too easy to encourage (perhaps unconsciously) those leaders to become Western in their thinking and approach. After a course in cross-cultural communication, a national pastor of five years experience confessed that throughout his ministry he had preached Western sermons to Asian audiences. After all, he had learned the Gospel from American missionaries: he had studied his theology, homiletics, and evangelism from English and German textbooks; and the great percentage of his Christian training had been in the language and other patterns of Western culture. No wonder his Christian communication lacked respondent cultural relevance even though the respondent culture in this case was his own culture.

Furthermore, for the most part, missionaries have not communicated Christ's concern for the people of still other respondent cultures. As a result many Christians in Hong Kong have little vision for Indonesia, and many Christians in Venezuela exhibit little concern for unbelievers in Peru. When missionary vision is born—and it has been born in many churches in the Third World—it seldom occurs as a result of the ministry of the North American or European missionary. Though the state of affairs is ironic and deplorable, it is understandable. The missionary's own missionary concern has been expressed in terms of his target culture. Unless he keeps his eyes on the fields, unless he sees the whole world as the object of God's love, and unless he communicates this to national Christians, their vision will tend to be limited by his own!

Illustration

It is now possible to summarize the missionary communication task by resorting to a hypothetical

illustration. Imagine the case of a missionary from New York who goes to Nagoya, Japan. His short-range objective will be to take the truths communicated in the biblical terms *Theos*, *hamartia*, and *soteria*⁷ (and related synonyms), and communicate them in terms of *Kami*, *tsumi*, and *sukui*.⁸ Ideally, he will encode these truths with as little intrusion of the North American cultural accretions attached to the terms God, sin, and, salvation as possible. This is no easy task, for by virtue of his enculturation, he is better equipped to understand the terms *Theos*, *hamartia*, and *soteria*. And he is certainly better prepared to understand *Kami*, *tsumi*, and *sukui*.

Moreover, his long-range objective must be to encourage Japanese Christian converts to become sources and to communicate Christ in culturally relevant terms within their own culture, and in still other respondent cultures—Javanese culture, for example. In that culture, Japanese missionary sources will be called upon to communicate the meaning of *Theos*, *hamartia*, and *soteria* in terms of *Allah*, *dosa*, and *keselamatan*.⁹ The way in which missionaries communicate Christian truth to Japanese, in forms available within Japanese culture, may have a salutary effect on the way in which Japanese missionaries present these same truths to Javanese Muslims. After all, Allah is defined by the Javanese Muslim in such a way as to make the Incarnation impossible. Sin is defined in such a way as to make the Incarnation unnecessary. And as for salvation, Muslims view God as merciful and sovereign and are quite willing to let it go at that. Whether or not the Japanese missionary is prepared to deal with these cultural differences may well depend upon the communication he has received from missionary tutors and models in Japan. ☉

End Notes

1. Robert Park, "Reflections on Communication and Culture." In *Reader in Public Opinion and Communication*, 2d ed., ed. Bernard Berelson and Morris Janowitz (New York: Free Press, 1966), p. 167.
2. Clyde Kluckhohn, *Mirror for Man* (New York: Whittlesey, 1949), p. 23.
3. Louis J. Luzbetak, *The Church and Cultures* (Techny, Ill.: Divine Word, 1963), pp. 60-61.
4. Eugene A. Nida, *Message and Mission: The Communication of the Christian Faith* (New York: Harper and Row, 1960), pp. 33-58.
5. Eugene A. Nida, *God's Word in Man's Language* (New York: Harper and Row, 1952), pp. 45-46.
6. *Ibid.*, p.45.
7. The Greek words corresponding to God, sin, and salvation.
8. The Japanese words corresponding to God, sin, and salvation.
9. The Javanese words corresponding to God, sin, and salvation.