

CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION OF THE GOSPEL

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Abstract

While people live in one world, they all see the world differently. This difference becomes even more evident if one is to translate the Christian message into a language and culture of a people who have lived outside the range of Christian influence. This paper addressed the question of how missionaries are to communicate the gospel in other languages and culture which differ markedly from their own. The methodology for this research is socio-cultural approach. It was found out that in order for the missionary to be effective in his endeavour, he should identify with the host culture. It was also found out that the missionary should contextualise the gospel message. It was recommended that to identify with a culture is to know and participate in its cultural forms and meanings. It was also recommended that Bible message is to be translatable into every culture in the world.

Keywords: Culture, Communication, Identification, Contextualization, and Missionary

Introduction

Cross-cultural communication of the gospel is the process of sharing the message of Christ across different cultures. This process involves understanding and respecting the cultural context of the receptor community. Understanding a culture plays a significant role in effectively sharing the gospel message to different cultures. Larry V. Brown believes that the communication of the gospel message is not exempt from cultural considerations and an effective presenter of the gospel must be able to recognize and account for the receiving culture's worldview while keeping the core message intact (1). This paper addressed the question of how missionaries are to communicate the gospel in other languages and culture which differ markedly from their own. The significance of this paper can be seen in the fact that while people live in one world, they all see the world differently. This difference becomes even more evident if one is to translate the Christian message into a language and culture of a people who have lived outside the range of Christian influence. The methodology for this research is socio-cultural approach.

The aim of this paper is to discuss some essentials for effective communication of the gospel cross-culturally.

Clarification of Basic Concepts

Culture

Technically, culture is defined as “the more or less integrated systems of ideas, feelings, and values and their associated patterns of behavior and products shared by a group of people who organize and regulate what they think, feel, and do” (Hiebert, *Anthropological* 30). Culture, therefore, is a people’s mental map of their world. This is not only a map of their physical world, but also a map for determining action. It provides them with a guide for their decisions and behaviors.

Communication

Communication is the transmission of information from a sender to a receiver. Robert H. Olver holds that “Communication is the process of inducing others to interpret an event, fact, opinion or situation in accordance with the intent of the speaker” (5). Communication occurs only when the sender and the receiver have something in common and both understand what the communicator intends to say.

Identification

Identification involves the totality of human relationships. “Far from being merely an imitation of people in another culture, identification means not being someone else, but being more than oneself. It is the purposeful participation in the lives of others” (Shewmaker 57). Pat Hile holds that identification is the establishment of a relationship between two or more parties so that there may be a free and honest interchange of ideas, attitudes and emotions (*Study*,34). Identification is therefore, the establishment of a relationship of equality so that each party may feel free to express their true opinions and positions.

Basic Dimensions of Culture

At the heart of a culture is the shared beliefs, feelings and values of a community of people. These are the basic dimensions of culture. The shared beliefs about the nature of reality “makes communication and community life possible. They provide people with the categories and logic they use to experience

the world” (Hiebert, *Cultural Differences* 376). Beliefs also tell people what exist and what do not exist. The affective aspect of culture (feeling) has to do with the people’s attitude, tastes in food and dress, notions of beauty, likes and dislikes, and ways of enjoying themselves or experiencing sorrows. Culture also includes values by which people judge the moral questions of right and wrong, obligation and duty, ideal behavior and acceptable conduct.

Every individual acquires the cultural heritage of a larger community through a process of learning. This learning process begins from the time of birth. Howard W. Law observes that, “Each individual from his birth is influenced and restricted, at least to some extent, by the patterns of behavior that already exist in his society” (13). Since the patterns of behavior (beliefs, feelings, and values) of one community is different from that of the others, so one culture is different from the others. So long as we live in our own culture, we are largely unaware of any difference. However, when we enter into a new culture, we become keenly aware of the fact that other people live differently. Then, we begin to realize that “People in different cultures do not live in the same world with different labels attached to it, but in radically different worlds” (Hiebert *Cultural Differences* 377). We begin to realize that while we are in one world, we all see the world differently. This difference becomes even more evident if we are to translate the Christian message into a language and culture of a people who have lived outside the range of Christian influence. An important question that must be confronted by the missionaries is, “How can we communicate the Gospel in other languages and culture which differ markedly from our own?” In other words, how can we communicate the Gospel cross-culturally?

The Missionary’s Task

The missionary’s task comes down to one basic responsibility: to effectively present the gospel of Christ in a cross-cultural situation. James J. Murphy suggests that there is a way of discovering (*modus inveniendi*) those things which are to be understood from the Scripture, and a way of expressing to others (*modus proferendi*) what one has learned from the Scripture (407). Cross-cultural communication of the gospel has to do with the latter. But the question is, since each one is unique with different pattern of behavior from that of others, how should the missionary penetrate a different and unique culture so as to deliver the message of Christ to them? The answer to this question has to do with the missionary life of identification and contextualization (the way of presenting the

message).

Missionary's Life of Identification

In the first place, what kind of persons should missionaries be when they enter alien cultures? A missionary is one who goes into the world to give people an opportunity to belong to God's family. In order for him to be effective in this endeavor, he has to identify with the host culture. To identify with a culture is to know and participate in its cultural forms and meanings. Ming Chao said that "opportunity of effectively communicating the gospel varies directly with the degree of emotional, psychological, and spiritual identification of the missionaries to the indigenous people" (17). Similarly, Sherwood G. Lingenfelter and Marvin K. Mayers write, "Missionaries by their task, must become personally immersed with people who are different" (22-23).

Jesus Christ models a life of identification. The apostle John writes, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made" (John 1.1-3 NKJ). He further writes, "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1.14 NKJ). Christ's incarnation is for the purpose of identification. The writer of Hebrews also says concerning Christ:

Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same, that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil. . . . Therefore, in all things He had to be made like His brethren, that He might be a merciful and faithful High Priest in things pertaining to God. To make propitiation for the sins of the people. (Heb. 2.14, 17 NKJ)

The role of identification is clearly seen in the incarnation and life of Jesus.

The apostle Paul also serves as an example for identification. He says, "For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win the more; and to the Jews I became as a Jew . . . to those who are under the law, as under the law . . . to those who are without law, as without law . . . to the weak I became as weak . . . I have become all things to all men" (1 Cor. 9.19-22 NKJ). He then says, "Now this I do for the gospel's sake, that I may be partaker of it with you" (1 Cor. 9.23 NKJ). Thus, identification is "becoming all things to all men."

Elements of Identification

Louis Luzbetak observes that when speaking of apostolic identification, there are two distinct elements to bear in mind: (1) empathy and (2) actual adoption (97). Empathy is a sympathetic understanding of the local customary ways and psychology, an understanding that allows for no exceptions. This empathy is based on understanding the local culture as the people would understand it and feeling personal struggles and successes that come from understanding life from this particular cultural point of view. Luzbetak describes empathy in this way:

Empathy means that the missionary fully understands and appreciates, as the local people do, the reasons behind their way of life. A missionary with true empathy views all native ways and values not through his colored glasses known as “enculturation” but in full native context. Without approving polygamy the missionary must understand why his people are polygamists, and without tolerating fetishism or promiscuity he must understand why his people venerate fetishes and what they are no matter what they are. Although empathy is internal, it is nonetheless clearly perceptive to the local people, and it is prerequisite for genuine apostolic identification (96-97).

Van Rheneen holds that “Empathetic identification is characterized by ‘sharing’” (*Biblically* 119). Eugene Nida defines this “sharing” as an active participation in the lives of people (169). This involves both the sharing of feelings on a personal level and the sharing of concepts on a philosophical level. Actual adoption is the internal approval and external usage of native ways and values, “which however, must at all times be within the limits of sound reason, prudence, science, faith, and the aim of missionary work” (Luzbetak 97).

Levels of Identification

Paul G. Hiebert discusses three levels of identification: lifestyles, roles and attitude (*Anthropological* 108-10). On the level of lifestyle, the missionary needs to learn the language of the host culture. Learning the language is the first step in the process of identification. William A. Smalley writes, “Language is the most important medium in any human society, it is the area where the largest number of the cues to interpersonal relationships lies” (698). If the gospel is to be understood, it is to be received as something which communicates truth about the

real human situation, if it is to make sense, it has to be communicated in the language of those to whom it is addressed and has to be clothed in symbols which are meaningful to them.

Communication is fundamental to man. God values communication and the gospel can only be communicated through language. Language is therefore of paramount significance in human life. Therefore, to communicate the gospel effectively, the missionary should try to learn the language of the target community. "The effectiveness of a missionary depends to a large extent on his ability to communicate in the foreign language in a culturally relevant manner" (Brewster and Brewster 885). Van Rheneen writes, "Identificational missionaries learn the language of the local people. They know that culture is communicated by verbal symbols and consider language learning the most important tool of culture learning" (*Missions* 60).

There are several reasons why a missionary should learn the language of a host culture. These include: (1) It aids in overcoming culture shock, (2) it shows people that you care about them, (3) it shows you are serious about the message, (4) it gets one into the culture, (5) it helps the missionary gain credibility, and (6) it helps one avoid difficulties with interpreters (Blackwelder 2).

But while language learning is crucial, it alone is not enough for knowing the corresponding culture. Edward T. Hall talks of silent language of culture that needs to be known. He observes that language is but one of ten primary message systems found in every culture (45). The others are association (family, kin, and community), subsistence (attitude toward work and division of labor), bisexuality (differing modes of speech, dress, and conduct), territoriality (attitude toward space and property), temporality (attitude toward time, routine and schedule), learning (by observation, modeling, or instructions), play (humor and games), defense (health procedures, social conflicts, and beliefs), and exploitation (methods of control, attitude toward the use and sharing of resources) (45-58). Each message system has rules that govern relationships and communication; each has a structure, a pattern, and variations that must be learned.

The second level of identification is role. Role has to do with the social positions that place some people above others. Since a missionary is a messenger of love and humility, he must exhibit the same before the people he goes to serve. Hiebert notes that "People respond to the gospel not only on the basis of its intrinsic truthfulness, but also according to the nature of the relationship within which they hear it" (*Anthropological* 261). Daniel N. Wambutda decries the fact

that “the missionaries and the Western world at large are paternalistic, and filled with the feeling of superiority” (725). He holds that, “There are still many missionaries running around not with the feeling of equality but of being little kings and expecting and even demanding that the Africans maintain their lowly positions” (725). A missionary therefore, should be careful with how he plays his role, since people are watching him. Hiebert says, “what is important is not how we see ourselves, but how others see us. That in the long run will determine the effectiveness of our ministry” (*Anthropological* 109).

The third level of identification is attitude. Hiebert writes, “Ultimately identification does not take place just because we live like the host people or even if we become part of their social structures. It begins with our attitudes toward them” (*Anthropological* 110). Even if the missionary should live in the houses of the host people, eat their food, dress like them, work under their authority, but have a sense of distance and superiority, they will soon know it. When the missionary truly loves people and sees them as humans like himself, the people will become interested in him and in his belief system.

Since the attitude of the missionary is very important in conveying the message, it is important that he enters a community with the attitude of being a learner. A sense of oneness with the people will create in the missionary an interest to learn more about them and to share in their culture. Hiebert observes, “Strangely enough we usually have more opportunity to share the gospel meaningfully when we enter a people’s society as students rather than teachers” (*Anthropological* 93). Similarly, E. Thomas Brewster and Elizabeth S. Brewster state that, “The missionary needs to be a learner before he can serve effectively” (887). Since the missionary’s aim is to be able to identify with the host culture, identification on the level of attitude is the basis for all other identifications. Should the people see that the missionary loves them, differences in lifestyle and roles will seem insignificant.

Barriers to Missionary Identification

There are some barriers to identification. First is cross-cultural misunderstanding. This has to do with a lack of knowledge and understanding of the new culture. Misunderstandings are based on ignorance of the beliefs, feelings and values of another culture. The solution is to learn how the other culture works.

The second barrier is ethnocentrism. Ethnocentrism is “the normal

emotional response people have when they confront other cultures for the first time” (Hiebert, *Anthropological* 97). When we are confronted by another culture, our own is called into question. Therefore, our defense is to avoid the issue by concluding that our culture is better and other people are primitive. Pat Hile writes, “The natural tendency is to assume that the way we grew up is the only way. He who acts differently is not only weird, but wrong. So the missionary begins to act condescendingly toward the nationals... He looks down on them and their way of doing things” (*Oneness*, 43). The root of ethnocentrism is our human tendency to respond to other people’s ways by using our own affective assumptions, and to reinforce those responses with deep feelings of disapproval or approval. Ethnocentrism is a big barrier to communicating the gospel because it makes us look down on other people. But it is important to know that no culture is superior to the other. On the other hand, what seems not to make sense to us about other cultures do make sense to the people and vice versa.

A third barrier is premature judgment. Premature judgment has to do with judging another culture too quickly before we learn to understand and appreciate them. Our initial assessment is often that the other culture is somehow inferior and ignorant. “Premature judgments are usually wrong. Moreover, they close the door to further understanding and communication” (Hiebert, *Anthropological* 101). While we have a right to make judgments about ourselves and others, it is important that the judgments be well informed. Therefore, we need to understand and appreciate other cultures before we judge them.

While we have discussed barriers to identification, it is important to know what identification is not. First, it does not mean rejecting our culture and going native. “There is a sense in which, no matter how hard we try, we can never truly ‘go native’” (Hiebert, *Anthropological* 105). We do not come as blank slates on which the new culture can be written. We all grow up with a certain way of life impressed on us. Therefore, we need not reject our culture for the sake of identifying with a new culture. On the other hand, no matter how we may try, the people will always know that we are foreigners. Second, identification does not mean blind approval and total adoption of native ways. There are definite limits beyond which the missionary may not go and regarding which he may not compromise (Luzbetak 96).

Contextualization

The second aspect of how to penetrate a unique culture has to do with the

way of presenting the gospel message. Cultural differences do not only affect the messengers, they also affect the message. Hiebert writes,

When missionaries arrive in a new region, they do not enter a religious and cultural vacuum. They find societies with well-developed cultures that provide for essential needs and make human life possible. They also find religious and philosophical beliefs that provide the people with answers to many of their deepest questions (Anthropological 171).

Since this is the case, how can the missionary effectively present the message of the Gospel to this unique culture? Certainly, one of the geniuses of the Gospel of Christ as revealed in the Bible is that it is translatable into every culture in the world. This is the reason the church has spread around the world. The fact of the translatability of the gospel is reflective of a reality: This means, in order for the gospel to be understood and to be relevant to differing people groups and subcultures, the gospel should be appropriately communicated for different cultural contexts. This process is called contextualization.

Christian contextualization is the “process whereby Christians adapt the forms, content, and praxis of the Christian faith so as to communicate it to the minds and hearts of people with other cultural backgrounds” (Pocock and others, 323). In other words, contextualization is “the process of translating the gospel into a culture so that the people understand and respond to it” (Moore 1). The goal is to make the Christian faith as a whole-- not only the message but also the means of living the faith out in the local setting--understandable. The contextualization of Christianity is part of the New Testament record. This is the process that the apostles were involved in as they took the Christian message that had come to them in the Aramaic language and culture and communicated it to those who spoke Greek. Charles H. Kraft writes, “In order to contextualize Christianity for Greek speakers, the apostles expressed Christian truth in the thought patterns of their receptors” (388). The Jerusalem meeting (Acts 15.1-29) set a pattern of Christian relationship between those of diverse cultures. Those receiving the gospel cross-culturally were not required to take upon themselves the culture of the sending church in order to be received into Christian fellowship. However, there are certain non-negotiables that all Christians need to believe and live out.

A burning question in the process of contextualization today is, how far

can the gospel be adapted to fit into a culture without losing its essential message? That is, how can the missionary effectively relate the message of Christ to a different culture today? Hiebert gives three approaches in relating the message of the gospel to a different culture. The first approach is a total rejection of old cultural ways or rejection of contextualization. This approach arises out of the concern that old cultural ways are directly or indirectly related to traditional religions, therefore, they are not acceptable for Christians. "Sometimes this rejection was rooted in the ethnocentrism of the missionaries, who tended to equate the gospel with their own culture and consequently judged other cultural ways as bad" (Hiebert, *Anthropological* 184). Van Rheneen observes that in this approach, proof texts are used to substantiate the view that God was in opposition to culture (*Biblically* 54). Several problems are associated with the wholesale rejection of cultural ways. First, it leaves a cultural vacuum that needs to be filled, and too often this is done by importing the customs of the missionary. For example, western hymns and melodies were translated into the local idioms. Secondly, old cultural ways are not dealt with but merely left to go underground and practiced in secret. For instance, it is not uncommon in Africa, for the people to conduct a formal Christian wedding in the church and then go to the village for the traditional celebrations. Thirdly, it not only turns missionaries and church leaders into police, but keeps converts from growing by denying them the right to make decisions on their own. "A church only grows spiritually if its members learn to apply the teachings of the gospel to their lives" (Hiebert, *Anthropological* 185). Similarly, Michael Pocock, Gailyn Van Rheneen and Douglas McConnell note that local leadership and new converts should be allowed to make decisions "even when the missionaries feel the decisions may be wrong. It is through the process of making such decisions that development happens" (330).

The second approach is accepting old cultural ways uncritically into the church or uncritical contextualization. In this approach, old cultural ways are seen as basically good, and few, if any, changes are seen as necessary when people are converted to Christianity (Hiebert, *Anthropological* 85). There are serious weaknesses with this approach. First, it overlooks the fact that there are group and personal ways of life that do not agree with the teachings of the Bible. "Contextualization must mean the communication of the gospel in ways the people understand, but that also challenge them individually and corporately to turn from their lifestyles" (Hiebert, *Anthropological* 185). Second, this approach opens the door to syncretism of all kinds. Syncretism is "the replacement or

dilution of the essential truths of the gospel through the incorporation of non-Christian elements” (Moreau 924). Syncretistic ideas and practices are a violation of the commandment to love God with all our hearts, souls, minds, and strength.

The third and better approach is called critical contextualization. In this approach, old beliefs and customs are neither rejected nor accepted without examination. “They are first studied with regard to the meanings and places they have within their cultural setting and then evaluated in the light of biblical norms” (Hiebert, *Anthropological* 186). To do this, first, an individual or church must recognize the need to deal biblically with all areas of life. Second, local leaders and the missionary should gather and analyze critically the traditional customs associated with the question at hand. Third, the church should be led in a Bible study related to the question under consideration. Fourth, the congregation should evaluate critically their own past customs in the light of their new biblical understandings and make a decision regarding their use (Hiebert, *Anthropological* 186).

There are some criteria necessary for critical contextualization. First, the Bible should be taken as the final and definitive authority for Christian beliefs and practices. Second, the Holy Spirit should be allowed to guide the Christians in their understanding and application of the Bible to their own lives (Hiebert, *Anthropological* 191). Third, to guard against a powerful individual leading a group astray, the church should safeguard against possible extremes. In this way Christians in different local settings should be willing to test their theologies in light of the teachings of the New Testament. Fourth, contextualization should bear fruit in the furtherance of the Christian mission and the transformation of the individuals and the community. “Any theology, however ‘relevant’ that does not help to shape God’s people in their shared life of discipleship and their participation in God’s kingdom mission is unworthy of the gospel” (Flemming 305).

Conclusion, Findings and Recommendations

This paper has attempted to help the missionary in effective communication of the gospel cross-culturally. On the one hand, cultural differences affect the messenger of the gospel and on the other, it also affects the message of the messenger. The former is dealt with by missionary identification. “Effective missionary identification lies at the heart of making Christ known across cultures and involves all that we are as human beings” (King 349). A

superficial missionary identification merely imitates the local customs of a people hoping to gain access for a hearing of the gospel. With time, however, the receiving culture will recognize such identification as gimmick. It is important to realize that the goal of missionary identification is not to propagandize people into the kingdom but to identify with them so as to communicate more clearly with them. The latter is dealt with by contextualization. In the process of contextualization, the church, through the Holy Spirit, continually challenges, incorporates and transforms elements of the culture in order to bring them to the lordship of Christ. It is hoped that in all, the missionary will allow himself to be used by God since the business is His.

In this study, it was found out that in order for the missionary to be effective in his endeavor, he should identify with the host culture. It was also found out that the missionary should contextualize the gospel message. It was recommended that to identify with a culture is to know and participate in its cultural forms and meanings. It was also recommended that Bible message is to be translatable into every culture in the world.

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