



Coping with Cultural Differences¹

Ted Ward

Whatever else may emerge from the current emphasis on globalization of theological education, we can hope that an increased awareness of the global nature and mission of the church will result. During this late-century upheaval of international realignments and changed alliances, ambiguities and confusion in the minds of Americans already threaten to usher in a new era of isolationism. The painful evidence suggests that many Americans are disoriented if they aren't clear as to who it is they are against.

A theologically grounded understanding of the church of Jesus Christ is necessarily global in scope and international in function. Deliberate exclusiveness and ignorant provincialism are similarly evidences of a faulty ecclesiology. The profound implications of the most basic of New Testament Scriptures "God so loved the world . . ." (John 3:16) direct attention to the world's scope and breadth and, just as surely, to the cultural diversity represented across the human clusters in that world.

It is tempting to fill the first part of this paper with data and details in support of the following generalizations:

1. The world is shrinking in terms of human movement and communications.
2. Populations are intermixing with increased pace; no longer are distinctions between "us" and "them" valid in many parts of the world. For example, white ethnic groups are clearly headed toward a well-mixed and minority status in the United States.
3. New alignments of socio-political power and influence are emerging replacing colonial and neocolonial structures with new empires based less on ideologies than on economic leverage.

While many people of the church are unwilling to accept these realities, it seems redundant to argue these points in the fellowship of informed scholars. It is more profitable to devote time and attention here to the implications for the education of church leaders of the new century.

The implications of these three rudiments of change center on one major issue: the capability of Christian communities to cope with cultural differences. Consciousness of the important role of culture in human understanding has substantially increased in this century, but the relationship between cultural barriers and the fulfillment of Christ's intended purposes for his church still rarely seems to be given adequate attention.

Deeper Issues Underlying Contextualization

At least within the sector of missions, the matter of culture is being given its due; but even here the cultural issues seem less than well centered. In recent years missiologists especially have emphasized contextualization. In reference both to the Bible in specific and the Gospel in general, "contextualization" is generally identified as a key to intercultural effectiveness. The tendency to think and work in terms of pragmatic and functional categories leads toward a definition of

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contextualization as the task of the evangelizing missionary or the expatriate teacher. In this view, we must make our Bible, our Gospel, and inevitably, our cultural emphases, more understandable to those from some other cultural background.

This image of contextualization falls short in several ways. Although it is dangerous, even hostile to the cross-cultural nature of the Gospel, it is perhaps the only view that is capable of being grasped by those who have a non-global view of the work of Christ.

The first flaw is the ethnocentric one-sidedness of the task itself. Instead of recognizing that the Gospel exists in similar vitality for each culture, the mistaken presumption naively traps the Gospel within categories and values of one's own culture and then attempts to transmit and reconcile those values and images to others. A far better way to view the task is as an invitation to those who come to Christ from another cultural background to deal with the Gospel themselves in terms of its biblical sources, letting the work of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit do their own confronting of cultural flaws and gaps.

The second flaw is in the purpose of contextualization. It is hazardous indeed to believe that any outsider can take on the purpose of putting the Gospel into someone else's context. The Apostle Paul's purposes, by contrast, seem far more concerned with building relationships than with modifying or transforming the message of the Gospel to accommodate cultural diversity. It is harder yet to think of Jesus as contextualizing the Scriptures to fit cultural specifics. The encounter with the Samaritan woman at Sychar's well is summarized in terms of a faith-inspiring attentiveness and understanding of her person and her situation. The content of Jesus' conversation with her is simple; and yet it leads to a large-scale evangelizing of Sychar (John 4:39). All of this occurs with little if any effort to contextualize across the very difficult cultural dissonances between Jews and Samaritans. One must imagine that the contextualizing task came later, as the Samaritan believers had to come to terms with the whole meaning of the Gospel. It was their job, not the task of Jesus or his disciples, to discern and discriminate within their own context and ultimately to let the Gospel evaluate and criticize specific matters within their cultural values and worldview.

Beyond the Pragmatics of Missionary Strategy

Modern American Christianity, perhaps the whole "modern missionary era," has dared to take on the "ends of the earth" having had little experience with the evangelization of "Judea and Samaria" (Acts 1:8). Although Luke's specification of the four outward-oriented circles of Gospel expansion should not be seen as a required sequence for all purposes, it has proved to be awkward and costly to send people into the fourth zone without training and experience in the second and third zones. In some respects it is easier to recruit people for missionary service to the exotic remoteness of the fourth zone. The distasteful and frightening intercultural jolts of the second and third zones are all too easy to see. And besides, it isn't as exciting, spectacular or worthy of support to go to those so close at hand.

The church in our time has glorified "foreignness" in missions with two unfortunate consequences. First, the adjective *foreign* has put global evangelism into a mindset loaded with us-them, here-there, and sender-receiver imagery and a consequent remoteness of the very idea of missions. Second, it has projected the most reasonable and predictable of the results of salvation (telling the good news) into a specialized and exotic professionalized category of work—weighed down with the forbidding idea of foreignness—of the ordinary Christian.

Is it possible for today's churches to be rescued from this trap? One promising model of delivery can be inferred from Acts 6. As the chapter opens, the young church of Jerusalem is growing well, but it is not yet moving out. It is a multi-ethnic church with internal problems that must ultimately be traced to racial and "tribal" prejudice. The believers of more pure Jewish origin were systematically neglecting the practical needs of fellow-believers of non-Jewish origin. Whether deliberate or unthinking—Luke does not tell us—it seems beside the point. Neglect is neglect, prejudice is prejudice, evil is evil.

The remedy for the young church lay in the same path, then uncharted, that is open to churches today:

1. Recognize the problem of neglect and acknowledge it to be dishonoring to the Gospel of Christ.
2. Become motivated toward change through the observation that unresolved problems of ethnic tension can and do hinder the work of Christ: they keep the church from being all that Christ intends; they inhibit "prayer and the ministry of the Word" (v. 4).
3. Come together in concern as the whole body of believers and seek a solution through the good offices of those who are "full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom." (Note well, the Holy Spirit *and* wisdom.)
4. Seek out from among the minority people themselves those who can help to heal the wounds, ministering both to the needs of the neglected and also ministering to the majority as they seek ways to redress the grievances of the past.

This pattern is clear in the selection of Stephen, Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas and Nicolas. Luke has been at pains to list these seven peculiarly Greek and Greco-Roman names. And he says that these seven are the whole list. The ethnic identity of these first deacons is crucial to the conclusion: "So the Word of God spread" (Acts 6:7). In wonderment and a touch of irony we must reflect today on our departure from the purpose and meaning of the original deacons: those who serve in practical ways to restore the integrity of the body of Christ as it is so easily prey to the wiles of the evil one—ministering to those who offend and are offended because of the inattentiveness of Christians to ethnic and cultural prejudice. When did we lose sight of Acts 6:1-7?

Leaders for the church in the next century must take their culture-learning lessons seriously. The time has come for the people of God to be the ambassadors and the teachers of intercultural competency for the whole of society. Since the tasks of mercy and the ministries of the gifts of the Spirit are through the whole church to the whole world, we must do our homework well. If the church of Jesus Christ is to be an honor to his name it should become a service of leadership and training in matters of intercultural skills and relationships—to be felt throughout the whole of human society as a ministry of reconciliation. The facts are plain: cultural differences are here to stay; unresolved ethnic tension is at the crux of much human conflict inside and outside the church; the reconciling work of Christ *is* a central theme of the Gospel. Thus it follows that if the people of God are competent and diligent in the work of the kingdom, their influences and their services should be widely recognized, utilized and appreciated. Is this not an avenue of effective witness to the power of our Lord?

The Educational Task

Especially among Christians who are conservative in their theology, politics, and choice of cereal, the predilection toward closure is evident at almost every turn. Thus *learning* is seen as a concern for storing up in the brain as many right answers as possible. The emphasis on information as answers is dominant over the idea of wisdom as exemplified in valuing the right questions. Culture learning is far

more than knowing information about a people and their habits. It is far more concerned with the *values* of people—the questions they ask and why they regard them as important enough to ask. Learning to communicate wisely within a culture is more a matter of listening than of speaking. It is more a matter of asking than answering, of interacting responsibly than directly attempting to influence.

Thus the skills of culture learning are as much the taking on of attitudes and relationships as of taking on information. What is needed most of all is an openness, the openness of genuine inquiry, dedicated to a continuing of learning-through-experience in “whatsoever state” one finds oneself throughout life.

The Limits of Cubic Space

Classrooms, lecture halls and library carrels are not the best environments for culture learning. Indeed, a student can and should learn about culture and structures of societies from books, lecture, and graphic media. But if the realities are to come clear and if a person’s whole socio-psychological personality and attitudinal matrix are to be reshaped into a “world Christian,” it takes more than the cubic space experiences of formal education. What is most needed is human interaction—interpersonal encounters in intercultural settings. The best curricula today include field experiences and contextual learnings—a sustained series of experiences in a metropolitan center, an overseas assignment or two, including at least one substantial encounter within a less materialistic culture. Through such opportunities for culture learning today’s formal education can be delivered from some of the limits of cubic space—the walls-ceiling-and-floor box we call a classroom. Just as surely as language learning develops faster in a field setting, the skills of culture learning are more effectively learned in real contexts.

Three Demons of Westernization

Three characteristics of western persons—both Europeans and North Americans—underlie much of the evident intercultural dissonance within the church. As a largely westernized movement during the colonial and post-colonial eras, Christianity has carried three demons along in its baggage: assertiveness, cleverness and neatness.

Assertiveness is most often attributed to the New World, and especially to people from the United States. It takes the form of incautious and inconsiderate pushing ahead with one’s own view of things. It shows up in the failure to listen well; perhaps this demon causes deafness. It is hard to overcome. It quickly becomes a part of one’s style of working with others. It demands acquiescence and docility. It works against the sharing of responsibility and the building of leadership.

Cleverness is a specialty of those who put much faith in technology and well-engineered plans. This demon always calls attention to itself and its own capacity to see “angles.” Its compromises with integrity are well known among those who take pride in their clever talents; perhaps this demon causes blindness—selective blindness, self-induced, at the very least. Prov. 16:8 becomes very hard to read: “Better a little [gain] with righteousness than much gain with injustice.” For Western Christians, learning not to trust one’s own cleverness is a difficult part of the culture-learning task.

Neatness, at the surface of things, is a humorous fixation. “Cleanliness is next to godliness” is the cornerstone in pseudo-scripture. But it goes far deeper than the compulsive tendency to arrange and rearrange, to wash and purify, to remain “above reproach.” It goes deeper into choices of appearances over realities, of claims rather than substance. And most especially this demon values *things* above

people; perhaps it causes lameness as Christians bog down in the mire of details and reports, valuing “evidences” seen on paper over trust seen in the eyes. Learning to deal with the resultant cultural dilemmas is a difficult task; learning to control the compulsive value itself is even harder.

Especially among those Christians who have carefully preserved and nurtured the historic Christian concern of the Bible as God’s special revelation of himself to humankind, careful *exegesis* is the rule. Responsible handling of the Word calls for avoidance of reading meaning into it; the highest value is to discover what it is saying in its own terms and contexts. This is a very tall order, to say the least, but it does have practical value: it puts a central focus on the meanings of the text while setting up a warning system to reduce the likelihood of imposing outside interpretations that would distort the understanding of the text. This concern for responsible exegesis should be extended with similar rigor to the responsible handling of cultural differences. Understandings of people and practices should be read from within the meanings of society to whatever extent possible; should be set against bringing exegetical meanings into one’s grasp of a given culture and especially to the comparative study of a given specific matter in two different cultural contexts.

Scholarly care for the integrity of cultures begins with the acknowledgement that one’s own culture is not the center of things. No ethnic group provides the standards by which all other cultures are measured or through which any other culture must come in order to grasp the meaning of the Gospel.

The American church in its fulfillment of its mission at home and abroad needs an incarnational image of itself: not as a proud leader of the nations, not as a holder of golden keys, but instead a presence of God within and among human societies. Its attitude and posture should reflect the Apostle Paul’s image of the incarnation of Christ: “he made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant . . . he humbled himself and became obedient to death (Phil. 2:7-8).