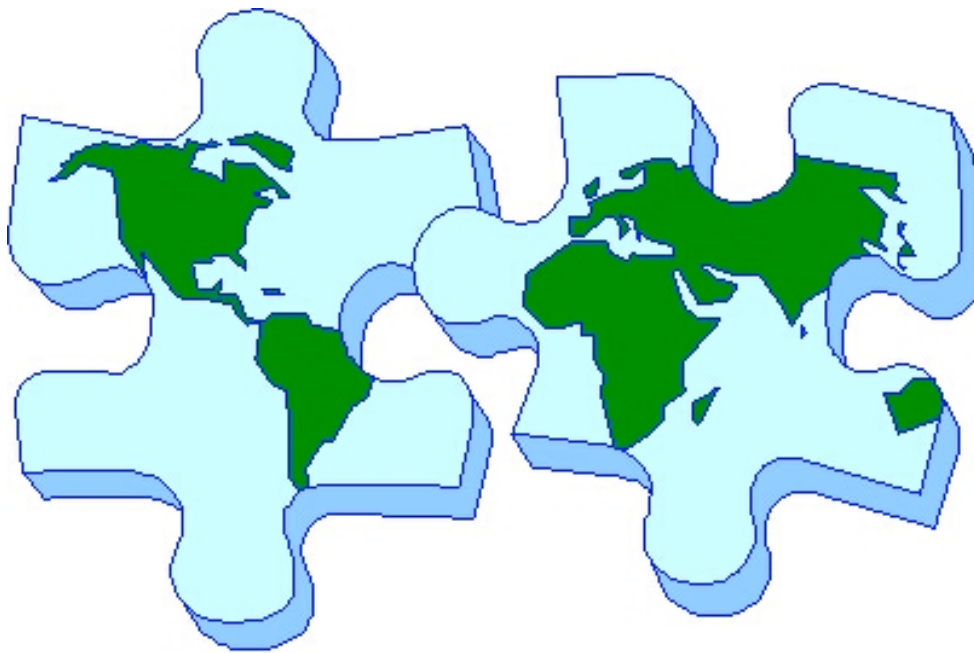


# Delta Course



***Cross-Cultural Church Planting***

**The Alliance for Saturation Church Planting**

# Delta Course

## Cross-Cultural Church Planter

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The Delta Course is a cross-cultural supplement to the Omega Course which was produced by:



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## PREFACE

### PURPOSE OF THE DELTA COURSE

The Delta Course is primarily developed as a supplement to the Omega Course, although many people will no doubt use it with other training materials. The Omega Course has gained acceptance in many countries and languages as a practical tool to prepare faithful believers to plant churches among their own people. The Omega Course may be downloaded without cost in all available languages at [http://www.sallee.info/Omega\\_Course.html](http://www.sallee.info/Omega_Course.html).

In today's world, there is a growing movement of people across borders and cultures, and a corresponding interest among church planters to reach out to other cultures and people groups with whom they come into contact. However, planting a church that fits into another culture is a difficult task that requires an understanding of cross-cultural principles. The Omega Course does not include this subject. The Delta Course is written to address this need.

### OVERVIEW OF THE DELTA COURSE

The Delta Course consists of five sections:

1. Discovering Missions – how the Gospel relates to culture
2. Understanding Culture – how culture affects church planting
3. Cross-Cultural Ministry – tools and techniques for cross-cultural ministry
4. Cross-Cultural Evangelism – how culture affects the process of evangelism
5. Cross-Cultural Training – how to train and reproduce leaders in a cross-cultural ministry

Each of these sections consists of several lessons that are designed to be practical and applicable to cross-cultural church planting situations. The lessons also include discussion questions and suggested steps for application. Studying the materials as a group or with a discussion partner or mentor will improve the effectiveness of the lessons.

### LIMITATIONS OF THE DELTA COURSE

There are thousands of distinct cultures in the world, which means there are a staggering number of ways that they may combine together. It is not possible for this course to address the specific cultural issues that a church planter from "Culture A" will encounter when ministering in "Culture Z."

Therefore, much of the content of the course must be somewhat general. However, every attempt is made to include basic cross-cultural principles and biblical truth that should work in most cultures. In addition, there are numerous examples of application in various cultures and countries.

Furthermore, the Delta Course does not attempt to present the full range of church planting principles, but only those that are specific to cross-cultural ministry. If you are not familiar with the basic issues of church planting, it is highly recommended that you read through the Omega Course or some other church planting material.

Larry Sallee, Delta Editor

January 2009



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DELTA COURSE

Introduction

# Introduction [9]

## “EVERY TRIBE, TONGUE, AND NATION”

### INTRODUCTION

This course is designed to supplement the information in the Omega Course. But the Omega Course is almost a thousand pages! Isn't that enough? For many church planters, it is. However, it would take more than a lifetime to learn all of the principles that experienced missionaries, pastors, and church planters have discovered during centuries of ministry.

The primary goal of the Omega Course is Saturation Church Planting—establishing a local church within the reach of every person. Therefore, a major emphasis of the Omega Course is on how to plant the *quantity* of new churches necessary to make one available to every person. The Omega Course also emphasizes the *quality* of the new churches, discussing universal qualities that churches everywhere should possess, including the importance of grace, the importance of cell groups, the centrality of worship, the training of leaders, etc.

For church planters who are working in their home area, with their own people, the Omega Course serves as a relatively complete guide to the multiplication of churches. However, believers ministering in more complex cross-cultural situations will soon discover that it is not enough to simply create *copies* of the churches from which they came. Instead, the new churches must be *different*. But what can and should be changed to adapt to the new culture and what must remain the *same* in order to be biblical?

Believers ministering in complex cross-cultural situations will soon discover that it is not enough to simply create *copies* of the churches from which they came.

This course is designed specifically for believers who are ministering to people of another culture, language, or worldview. The differences encountered in cross-cultural ministry are not trivial. Cross-cultural church planters need a great deal of patience, understanding, and wisdom in order to minister successfully. This course, like the Omega Course, is intended to be intensely practical and applicable to real-life church planting situations.

### I. THE NEW ERA OF MISSIONS

Typical students of the Omega Course can faithfully serve the Lord by planting new churches among their people so that their unique cultural traits are represented before the throne of God. However, if they become missionaries to other cultures, they need to appreciate the positive values of the new cultures and make sure they are included in the worship of the new churches. This cultural sensitivity is all the more important today because of the following facts:

- There is a huge increase in the number of non-western church planters around the world.
- Travel is so much easier and more affordable in this day of cars, planes, and trains.
- More and more believers are going to other countries and languages, for work or ministry.
- More Western nations are recognizing the value of non-western church planters and helping them to go to diverse people groups.
- Refugee relocation, immigration, students studying abroad, and other people movements are bringing diverse peoples into contact with each other—it is no longer necessary to *go* in order to meet them—they are *coming*!

All of these points illustrate the tremendous *opportunity* that non-western church planters have to work cross-culturally today. However, little has been done to address the need for cross-cultural *training* for these non-western missionaries. This is the emphasis of this course.

## II. LEARNING FROM HISTORY

Almost everyone, including churches in the West, understands that Western missions have made tremendous cultural blunders throughout the past few centuries of missionary activity around the world. In most cases, the methods of ministry were probably well-intentioned, and they did manage to establish national churches around the world. However, paternalism and feelings of superiority often left terrible scars on both the missionaries and the churches they founded. To this day, we are reaping the results of cultural insensitivity, including

Western missions have made tremendous cultural blunders throughout the past few centuries of missionary activity around the world.

- Spiritually weak national churches and leaders
- Materialistic believers more interested in aid than in godliness
- Strained relationships between Western and national Christians
- Jealousy over funding and educational opportunities
- “Western-looking” churches that do not fit the local culture or attract unbelievers
- Rationalistic patterns of theology and teaching that do not resonate with the needs of local believers
- Musical, literary, and worship styles that are “foreign”
- Resistance to Christianity as a “Western religion”

Western missions, for the most part, now recognize that many of their past styles of ministry were wrong, and are working diligently to find and implement better strategies. Admittedly, they have a long way to go, but they are moving in that direction. However, “if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don’t fall” (1Co 10:12).

It has been said that “those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it.” As church planters from countries around the world begin to move out into foreign harvest fields, they must be careful not to repeat the same mistakes that Western missions have made in the past. The grave danger is to think the problem of cultural insensitivity is “Western” when in reality it is “human.”

It is human nature to think that our way is best. Pride is a result of the Fall and affects every person to varying degrees. Even missionaries with extensive training in culture can fall victim to pride in their own cultural superiority. How much easier for a well-meaning church planter with no understanding of culture to try to build an exact copy of his home church among another people! Russian churches do not fit into Kazak culture and Brazilian worship does not match Senegalese style any more than American preaching fits into Filipino society. Any church planter going from any culture to another must adapt to the new situation.

Russian churches do not fit into Kazak culture and Brazilian worship does not match Senegalese style any more than American preaching fits into Filipino society.

## III. EXPANDING OUR WORLDVIEW

It is impossible to plant a church that “fits” into another culture until we understand the unique traits of that culture. This is easier said than done. Behavior and outward appearance are not hard to see if we are observant. But the inner thought processes, values, and beliefs that are so much more important to understand are hidden deep within people. Their worldview—a way of looking at the world—must be discovered through diligent effort, unwrapping the levels of culture like peeling away the layers of an onion.

If we are honest, we will find that God has created certain values and characteristics in every culture that are superior to our own. Others traits may be inferior. Some will reflect God's glory. Others will be fueled by sin. We must identify the things that are good, the things that are bad, and the things that are neutral. It takes great wisdom and much prayer and humility to determine which is which.

An important goal of cross-cultural church planters is to value the new culture in which they minister. In the process, they need to recognize those God-given nuggets of personality that must be preserved in the church planting process. As they do so, they are in a better position to plant and grow a church that will flourish in the new culture, reflecting the Lord's character.

#### **IV. COURSE LAYOUT**

This course will eventually consist of five sections and approximately twenty-two lessons. This draft version includes the first fifteen lessons. The lessons are intended to provide a theological and philosophical base for planting culturally-relevant churches. At the same time, every effort has been made to make the lesson material as practical as possible. The major sections of the course are as follows:

##### **Part 1. Discovering Missions**

This part consists of five lessons that explain the importance of planting churches that will thrive in the culture and transform lives, rather than simply transplanting models of church from another country. The early church in Acts serves as an example of what to do and what not to do.

##### **Part 2. Understanding Culture**

This section examines the elements of culture that make societies different. These characteristics combine to form the unique worldviews of every culture. A truly indigenous church must include the godly traits and emphases of the culture.

##### **Part 3. Cross-Cultural Ministry**

Cross-cultural ministry is difficult and requires sacrificial effort. This section explains why some of the shortcuts that are ineffective in bringing true life change, and explains the principles and methods of communication that can help church planters to bridge the gap to their audience.

##### **Part 4. Cross-Cultural Evangelism**

This section focuses on how to adapt the presentation of the Gospel to the audience so that it will have a better chance of being heard. This requires thoughtful understanding of the audience, and also a thorough knowledge of basic facts the Gospel message that cannot be changed without distorting the truth. *(Parts of this section are still in development)*

##### **Part 5. Cross-Cultural Training (To be developed)**

*This section will deal with principles, practices, and models for the cross-cultural training of disciples and leaders in the new churches. The emphasis will be on a mentoring, facilitating, and multiplying approach to training.*

#### **CONCLUSION**

In order to fulfill the Great Commission, we must establish worshipping and witnessing communities of believers across the globe. There are three aspects to faithfully completing this task:

1. *Quantity* – We need enough churches within the geographic reach of every person.

2. *Quality* – The new churches must conform to the biblical pattern we have been given, worshipping in both spirit and truth (Jn 4:24).
3. *Diversity* – The new churches must reflect the unique God-given cultural traits that demonstrate the Lord’s redemption of “every nation, tribe, people, and language.”

Church planters who minister in a cross-cultural situation must grapple with the implications of the third characteristic of the new church. It will not be easy since cultural traits arise from deep within the worldview of a person. Furthermore, every culture is a mix of good, evil, and neutral traits. The task is not impossible, however. The church planter who proceeds with humility, prayer, observation, and a learning spirit can steadily unwrap the layers of culture and begin to understand and value the diversity of God’s creation. Only then can they plant a church that is all the Lord intended it to be. This course is designed to help with that important process.

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**PART 1:**  
**DISCOVERING MISSIONS**

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DELTA COURSE

1

LESSON

# Theology of Missions [7]

## PLANTING THE RIGHT VARIETY OF CHURCH

### ☞ Lesson Purpose

The purpose of this lesson is to explain the importance of making disciples in every ethnic group and developing local churches among them that reflect their unique God-given cultural traits.

### ☞ Main Points

- The multi-cultural nature of the Church is seen in the worship of the saved before the throne of God in heaven.
- The incredible variety of nature is a model for the necessary diversity of local churches.
- Church planters must allow the “seed” to grow into acceptable local church forms, rather than “transplanting” foreign church models.

### ☞ Desired Outcomes

When the content of this lesson has been mastered, each participant should

- Appreciate the importance of maintaining diversity in the Church.
- Draw important parallels between the planting of different varieties of seed and the planting of different kinds of local churches.
- Be aware of the danger of syncretism when core Christian beliefs and practices are neglected in the search for diversity.

### ☞ Appendices

Appendix 1A summarizes God’s plan for mankind as a six-act narrative. This appendix serves as a review of the major themes of the Omega Vision track.

## I. THE PURPOSE OF THE CHURCH

It is amazing that there is so much confusion about the purpose of the Church. Some people act as if the Church exists for their personal benefit or welfare. Others see the Church as a vehicle for social or political change. Still others understand it to be primarily an institution to promote peace and goodwill among people. All of these ideas fall short of the biblical purpose of the Church.

Scripture is clear that the Church exists to proclaim the nature of God and to bring everyone into an obedient, worshipping relationship with Him. In other words, the Church exists primarily for God’s benefit—not ours. Yes, it is true that the Church sometimes can improve human relationships and conditions, but that is secondary to the major purpose of the Church.

### A. The Great Commission

The Great Commission in Matthew 28 is generally regarded as the clearest statement of the purpose, or mission, of the Church.

*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age. (Mt 28:18-20)*

This charge was delivered to the disciples after Christ's resurrection as He prepared them to carry on His work. It is also clear that He was instructing not only twelve, but the entire Church that would remain until His return ("*to the very end of the age*"). Closely parallel to this passage is Christ's final command immediately before His ascension:

*. . . you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.* (Ac 1:8)

Believers are to be witnesses who proclaim the nature and character of Jesus to all people everywhere. Any other "good" work that the Church could accomplish is secondary to this overriding task.

## B. Essential Vision

The *Essential Vision* booklet published by the Alliance for Saturation Church Planting summarizes the New Testament purpose of the Church in three concise statements:

1. God's ultimate purpose is to glorify Himself in all things and that His glory would cover or fill all the earth.
2. God has a plan to accomplish His purpose.
3. God will use His Church.

*Essential Vision* emphasizes the role of vibrant, reproducing local churches as the instruments to fulfill the Great Commission. Local churches are the visible expressions of the universal Church. They are Christ's body in tangible form. They are the places where believers are nurtured, equipped, and motivated to carry the Gospel message to the lost world. Individual believers are limited in their gifts, abilities, and opportunities for ministry. But the local church contains all the human and spiritual resources to accomplish the task that the Lord has called us to do.

Local churches are the visible expressions of the universal Church. They contain all the human and spiritual resources to accomplish the task that the Lord has called us to do.

## C. Omega Emphasis

The Omega Course exists in order to facilitate the fulfillment of the Great Commission by equipping faithful laypersons in local congregations to evangelize, disciple, and plant new churches. An underlying assumption of the Omega Course is that these laypersons are uniquely qualified to build relationships with their friends and neighbors and to explain the Gospel to them in ways that are relevant. Because laypersons share common experiences with them, they are often more acceptable "witnesses" than professional missionaries or clergy. The Omega Course encourages all the faithful believers in the local churches to do their part to fulfill the mission of the Church.

## II. THE ETERNAL DIVERSITY BEFORE THE THONE OF GOD

One of the key concepts of the Omega Course is the "Z-Principle," which teaches us to "start with the end in mind." That is, if we understand clearly what we want to accomplish, we are better able to develop a strategy to make it happen. What then, is the end goal of our church planting? What final outcome does the Lord want to see?

The Lord allowed two of His servants—David in the Old Testament and John in the New Testament—to see visions of the worship of God in heaven in the future. The descriptions of the people who are present are remarkably similar, even though John received his vision more than six centuries after Daniel.

### A. Daniel's Vision of Heaven

Daniel received this vision during the "first year of Belshazzar, king of Babylon" (Da 7:1). That would be approximately 553 B.C., during the exile of the Jews in Babylon. In Daniel's vision, the glory, authority, and power over all creation is delivered to the "son of man." We

know this “son of man” is Christ because He used that title for Himself almost eighty times in the Gospels (Mt 19:28; Mk 13:26; Lk 22:48). Our concern now is the identity of the multitude of people who are worshipping Him.

*I kept looking in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven One like a Son of Man was coming, and He came up to the Ancient of Days and was presented before Him. And to Him was given dominion, glory and a kingdom, that **all the peoples, nations and men of every language** might serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion which will not pass away; and His kingdom is one which will not be destroyed. (Da 7:13-14)*

Note the bolded phrase in the passage above. Although this group has been brought together into one kingdom, the vision clearly emphasizes their ethnic, linguistic, and cultural diversity. They are assembled from “all” the peoples and nations and from “every” language. This description must be important because the almost identical phrase is repeated two more times by John.

## B. John’s Vision of Heaven

Sometime after A. D. 90, the Apostle John was in exile on the Isle of Patmos and saw a series of visions concerning future events. John sees not just one—but two—visions of people around the throne of God that are very similar to the group that Daniel saw.

*When He had taken the book, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each one holding a harp and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. And they sang a new song, saying, "Worthy are You to take the book and to break its seals; for You were slain, and purchased for God with Your blood men from **every tribe and tongue and people and nation**. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to our God; and they will reign upon the earth." (Rev 5:8-10)*



*After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could count, from **every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues**, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, and palm branches were in their hands; and they cry out with a loud voice, saying, "Salvation to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb." (Rev 7:9-10)*

Bible scholars disagree somewhat about the exact identity of these people, and whether they are the same group or two different ones. But one key fact is not in dispute: whoever these people are, they come from “every tribe, tongue, people, and nation” *and are still recognizable as such in heaven!*

These people come from “every tribe, tongue, people, and nation” *and are still recognizable as such in heaven!*

## C. God-given Differences

The description of these people in heaven is in sharp contrast to a common misconception that people in heaven will all be alike—wearing identical white robes and halos, and all looking and talking alike. Clearly the visions of Daniel and John show that this view is erroneous. In heaven, it seems that our individual ethnic, linguistic, and cultural differences will remain. Yes, they will be sanctified and cleansed of any sinful influences, but they will still distinguish us one from another.

The disciples apparently had no trouble identifying Moses and Elijah at the Transfiguration (Mt 17:3; Mr 9:4; Lk 9:30). Christ and the marks of the crucifixion were recognizable to His disciples after His resurrection (Mt 28:9; Lk 24:39-40; Jn 20:20-27). We will not be given *new* bodies in heaven—rather, our *old* bodies will be changed, renewed, and transformed into immortal, imperishable bodies (1Co 15:35-54).



The worship in heaven is not a generic “God is wonderful.” Instead, the topic of praise is specifically that the Lamb has redeemed people from every cultural group from their former sinful way of life and transformed them into holy priests who demonstrate God’s love, mercy, and power. In other words, the former lives of these people have *great relevance* to the worship in heaven. Apparently the redemption of sinful mankind demonstrates God’s character much more than the eternal, sinless worship of the angels (Eph 2:4-6). It is therefore important that believers retain traits of their past in order to highlight the incredible changes that Christ has made in them.

Furthermore, Christ has transformed people from every ethnic group. Israel was commanded to be a witness to *all nations* (Ge 18:18; 22:18; Ps 67; Jer 33:9), as was the Church (Mt 28:19-20; Ac 1:8). The best translation for “all nations” is “every ethnic group.” Their presence before God’s throne is so important that in the final days He sends an angel to complete what Israel and the Church fail to accomplish:

*Then I saw another angel flying in midair, and he had the eternal gospel to proclaim to those who live on the earth—to every nation, tribe, language and people.* (Rev 14:6)

How can we miss this repeated emphasis on the diversity among God’s worshippers? In the great choir around the throne, there will not only be tenors, but also altos, bases, and sopranos! Choruses of praise will rise up in every imaginable language. Anything less would limit the beauty of the worship! Imagine an orchestra with only one instrument or a painting with only one color. How boring! How unlike creation! How unlike God!

### III. VARIETY IN NATURE

One of the most striking features of the world around us is the incredible variety in nature. Traveling from one location to another typically means encountering completely new kinds of trees, flowers, animals, vegetables, birds, etc. This experience is one of the most enjoyable and educational aspects of travel. We find that the world is much more complex and interesting than the small portion that we used to know.

#### A. Varieties and Species

There is a reason for this amazing variety in nature. Plants and animals that thrive in one location may do poorly in another. Living things, whether cows or bean plants, cannot automatically be transported to a new location and be expected to survive.

Let us use rice as an example. Rice is grown in many areas of the world, but not the same *variety* of rice. Scientists classify *rice* as a “*species*.” It has unique characteristics that make it *rice* and not *corn*. However, there are many kinds of rice—different “*varieties*,” some more distinct than others.

#### B. Rice Varieties

Let us consider the many varieties of rice as one example of the diversity of the world of plants that God has created. Rice is sometimes categorized as

1. Long grain – warm weather rice in Thailand, India, Pakistan, Brazil, and the southern US
2. Round grain – cold weather rice in Japan, Korea, northern China, and western US
3. Medium grain – only found in Indonesia

These labels only scratch the surface, however. In reality, there are at least 40,000 varieties of rice. A rice bank in the Philippines holds 100,000 samples because of the recognized importance of preserving all possible varieties. Every rice variety has unique traits that might make it the best choice for a particular area depending on

- level of rainfall or drought
- available nutrients
- insects and other pests
- length of growing season
- seasonal temperatures
- taste preferences of the consumers
- cost of seed
- space requirements
- etc.



It is not enough simply to decide to “plant rice.” Wise farmers know they must choose varieties of rice that are suitable for the local conditions. The same holds true for raising any crop or animals in any location. Although this is obvious, we often miss the application to church planting.

#### IV. PLANTING A WIDE VARIETY OF CHURCHES

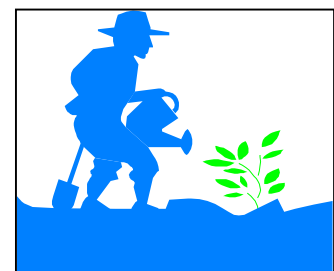
In describing his ministry in Corinth, the Apostle Paul said that he planted and God caused the growth (1Co 3:6). This is an important analogy from which we get the term “church planter.” Yet when we study Paul’s methods of church planting, we find that they varied greatly from one location to another. He described this flexible approach as becoming “all things to all men” (1Co 9:22). More importantly, the churches he planted were not identical—we might say they were different varieties of churches. A church that fit well in a Jewish area might not have grown well in a Roman context.

The churches Paul planted were not identical—we might say they were different *varieties* of church.

##### A. Spiritual Planting

There is no magic formula for planting churches. There are guidelines and principles that can help, but the specific approach must be adapted to the local situation. At the same time, church planters do not have infinite freedom in starting new churches. Although there are thousands of varieties of rice, each one has a common core that makes it “*rice*”—not beans or some other species of plant. In the same way, cross-cultural church planters must be careful to sow sound doctrine so that the new groups which are formed will truly be part of the “Body of Christ.”

Jesus warned that confusion was possible. In the Parable of the Tares, a landowner sowed good wheat seed (the kingdom of heaven). Later, an enemy sowed tares (false believers) among the wheat. Tares are generally understood to be a grass called dandelion, which in its younger stage looks almost like wheat but produces a poisonous seed. In the parable, the enemy understood the damage he was doing. However, it is also possible for church planters to unintentionally plant tares by neglecting to communicate the core concepts of Christianity to new converts, or by including cultural forms that are incompatible with Scripture.



One of the major goals of this course is to help church planters discern which aspects of a culture support authentic Christianity, which are neutral, and which are contrary or detrimental to biblical spirituality. New believers should be encouraged to develop a variety of church that will best thrive in their culture, without accepting unchristian beliefs and behavior.

## B. Sowing Seed vs. Transplanting

There is a strong temptation for church “planters” to function as church “transplanters.” That is, they try to reproduce an exact copy of their own church in another culture. Instead of sowing the seeds of the Gospel and the truths of Scripture and watching how God will make them grow, they try to control the process to fit their own desires. The Omega Course addressed the issue this way:

*Church planters should realize that they do not plant fully developed churches, but sow seeds which grow into mature churches (1Co 3:6). The first converts to become leaders should have some say in the forms, structures and programs. Why? So that the new church will be appropriate to the culture and needs of those whom it will serve.*

*If we expect to participate with God in the establishing of a church planting movement in this region, then the definition of the church should resemble a ‘seed’ and not a fully developed ‘tree.’ It should grow and adapt in order to best reach the lost around it. (Manual 1, Church Lesson 4, p. 77)*

It is possible to guide the shape of a young, growing tree to some degree. Skillful trimming and bending of branches can influence the shape of the mature tree. However, every tree is different—there is a way that it wants to grow. Excessive pruning or bending can kill or deform the tree. A wise arborist must know how far to go. And the same principle applies to the process of planting a church.



## C. If the Whole Church Were \_\_\_\_\_

Church planters must adjust their cross-cultural ministry so that it preserves cultural distinctives in any new church they establish. The Lord does not *change* every culture to fit the same mold, but *combines* them in a way that makes the character of the whole Church richer as a result. Christ wants to make believers *one*, not the *same*.

At first glance, it may seem like unity and diversity are incompatible. In the spiritual realm, however, this is not the case. The best example is marriage, where couples become one in the Lord. A man and a woman are so obviously different in their appearance, emotions, abilities, etc. Each of them contribute unique traits to the marriage, which when skillfully combined, make the united couple stronger than they were individually.

At the 2006 Urbana Missions Conference, one of the speakers was an African pastor in Nairobi. He paraphrased 1 Corinthians 12 in the following way:

- If the whole Church were *European*, where would the *joy* be?
- If the whole Church were *African*, where would the *order* be?

His point was that the church in every country makes an important contribution to the Body of Christ. If any part is missing, the entire Church suffers for it. If we honestly asked the same question about our own church, we could probably point to some aspect of the Christian life which is poorly represented in our own culture. How would you fill in the blanks?

- If the whole Church were (*my country*), where would the \_\_\_ be?

A body which is missing a limb or some other part is handicapped and unable to accomplish some tasks. In the same way, the Church that is missing the unique traits of some cultures will not be as well-rounded or as balanced as the Lord desires. That is why it is so important for church planters to be sensitive to cultural issues when they minister to other people groups.

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## CONCLUSION

Planting a church is similar to planting anything else—there is no single “best way” to do it. In both cases, different locations and conditions require the skillful use of a variety of techniques and seed. Of course, the resulting harvest will not be identical. All rice is not alike, and neither are all local churches. This, however, is a good thing. It reflects the diversity that God has created in nature and in human culture.

Scripture repeatedly shows that when believers appear before the throne of God, they will be recognizable as being from *every tribe, nation, people, and language*. In fact, the worship of the saved will center on the fact that Christ has redeemed people from every one of these ethnic groups. Even in this life, the Body of Christ will be more well-rounded and capable because of the unique contribution of every culture. Further lessons will explain in greater detail what church planters should do in order to keep the positive aspects of each culture without including heretical beliefs or sinful practices. There is, after all, a vital distinction between *beneficial varieties of wheat* and *poisonous tares*!

## QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION, REVIEW AND APPLICATION

- List as many examples as you can find in Scripture where a person who had died was recognized by someone else. What does this tell you about our form and appearance after death?
- Of the different kinds of plants that you know, which one has the most obvious number of varieties? How do the differences in these varieties affect you personally?
- When Paul planted, he said that “God made it grow” (1Co 3:6). How does this fact affect the planter’s responsibility to select appropriate seed, prepare the soil, and care for the plant?
- What are the conditions that need to be present in order to successfully transplant something? Under what conditions might you expect a transplant to fail? How does this relate to church planting?

## ACTION PLAN

- Expand the list of “if the whole Church were \_\_\_\_\_” to as many countries or ethnic groups as you can in order to help you reflect on the unique value of each group to the Body of Christ.
- Talk to a farmer or some other knowledgeable person about varieties of plants. Consider how the insights you learn from them might relate to the concept of having many “varieties” of local churches.

## SOURCES

- *Essential Vision*, The Alliance for Saturation Church Planting, 2000.



# God's Mission and the Church [6]

## BUILDING ON A BIBLICAL FOUNDATION

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### INTRODUCTION

One of the foundational questions people wrestle with is “Why do I exist?” God’s answer is that He created us to bring Him glory forever. We are part of His grand plan to show how His holiness triumphs over sin, how He is victorious over Satan, and how His love and grace can overcome our rebellion. This plan began before creation with His decision to redeem sinners through Christ’s sacrifice, and it continues beyond the end of this world, into the new heaven and earth. It is revealed slowly and progressively in the Scriptures.

One helpful way to understand the outworking of God’s purpose for mankind in general and for believers in particular is to view history as a grand narrative or play. In this narrative, God reveals His desire for the lost to be brought into fellowship with Him and for believers of every age to be His instruments and ambassadors in that process. This is God’s mission, and it should be ours as well. The following sections present the major themes of this story in six acts.

### ACT I: CREATION – THE KING ESTABLISHES HIS REIGN

The first scene of any story or drama is always very important. It introduces the principle protagonists and themes. In the case of the Bible, the first scene is found in Genesis 1. We read there that God formed from nothing, *toju* (without form) and *voju* (without content), an organized and balanced universe. Every component of creation had its place and role.

Mankind was the culmination of creation, and God crowned them with the responsibility of being **vice-kings** of all He had created. In the myths in the ancient near east, gods created humans to serve them or to fill certain needs. Instead, the God of the Bible, Yahweh, created human beings, not out of necessity, but simply for His desire, His goodness, and to share His glory.

In Genesis 1 and 2 God created human beings, male and female, in a special way. Although all that God created was good and had value in His eyes (and for that reason, as we will see later, was worthy of redemption as well), God had a personal and intimate relationship only with mankind. Only humans were created in the image of God (Ge 1:26-28).

In the ancient near east, a king would erect an image of himself to indicate his dominion. His image represented his kingdom and glory. Our creation in the image of God indicates our role as God’s representatives in this world. We are responsible to exercise dominion over the world and reflect the characteristics and values of our Maker. Our chief responsibility as vice-kings is to increase and magnify the reputation of the king.

The first scene ends with a benevolent God in fellowship with His special creatures, Adam and Eve. He placed them in a beautiful garden and allowed them to reign with Him and enjoy His company. Everything was in order and all creation fulfilled its purpose. There was beautiful harmony among animals, humans, and the climate. The glory of God was expressed by the way in which He cared for mankind.

### ACT II: THE FALL – THE VICE-KINGS REBEL AGAINST THE KING

In every good drama, conflict arises. God and man are in harmony in the world when suddenly a snake appears to destroy the peace and order which God created (Ge 3). Instead of depending on

God's wisdom and His care, Adam and Eve decide to be like God; they cross over the established limits, and as a result chaos, sin, death, and suffering enters both mankind and nature.

The narration in Genesis 3 to 11 describes the grave consequences of the fall and the amplification of chaos, sin, arrogance, violence, and injustice. When we finish chapter 11 of Genesis, we ask ourselves: How is God going to respond to all this? Mankind did not complete their responsibility. What will God do?

### ACT III: ELECTION – THE KING SELECTS ISRAEL TO REDEEM HIS CREATION

In Genesis chapter 12 God reveals how He plans to deal with the dire consequences of sin. He has a deep love for mankind, and will fulfill the purpose for which He created the world. God is going to restore the whole world through one person and His descendents.

<sup>1</sup> *The LORD had said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. <sup>2</sup> "I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. <sup>3</sup> I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."* (Ge 12:1-3)

As this promise and plan is further explained in Genesis through Deuteronomy, we learn that God wants to use the nation of Israel to bring blessings to the whole world (Ex 19:3-6). In order to do that, His people need to know their God—who He is, what He wants, etc. They must worship Him alone and reflect His values and His will to the world. This strategy is reflected in Psalm 67:

<sup>1</sup> *May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face shine upon us, <sup>2</sup> that your ways may be known on earth, your salvation among all nations. <sup>3</sup> May the peoples praise you, O God; may all the peoples praise you. <sup>4</sup> May the nations be glad and sing for joy, for you rule the peoples justly and guide the nations of the earth. <sup>5</sup> May the peoples praise you, O God; may all the peoples praise you. <sup>6</sup> Then the land will yield its harvest, and God, our God, will bless us. <sup>7</sup> God will bless us, and all the ends of the earth will fear him.* (Ps 67)

It was difficult for Israel to faithfully reflect God's values to the nations since they had lived in Egypt for more than 400 years, learning bad habits and perspectives. The development of the story (Genesis 12 to Malachi) reveals two principle themes: (1) Israel was not able to faithfully complete the mission of glorifying God and being His Light to the world, and (2) God continued to be faithful even though Israel rebelled.

God sent many prophets (i.e., Elijah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel) to warn His people of their idolatry, their infidelity and the resulting consequences. When Israel did not repent, they were exiled—taken out of their land and apparently taken out of God's plan. But God did not abandon His plan to use Israel to bless all nations. By means of the prophet Ezekiel He proclaimed,

<sup>22</sup> *"Therefore say to the house of Israel, 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am going to do these things, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations where you have gone. <sup>23</sup> I will show the holiness of my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, the name you have profaned among them. Then the nations will know that I am the LORD, declares the Sovereign LORD, when I show myself holy through you before their eyes.*

<sup>24</sup> *"For I will take you out of the nations; I will gather you from all the countries and bring you back into your own land. <sup>25</sup> I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. <sup>26</sup> I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. <sup>27</sup> And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. <sup>28</sup> You will live in the land I gave your forefathers; you will be my people, and I will be your God.* (Eze 36:22-28; see also Isa 35:40-55)

The Old Testament story ends with Israel, God's people, returning to the Promised Land but still disobeying God (Malachi). God proclaims that He will send His messenger to prepare the way for the restoration of His nation and of the world (Mal 3:1-5; 4:1-5). How will He do that?

## ACT IV: THE FIRST COMING OF JESUS – THE KING COMES TO RESTORE HIS CREATION

The four Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) are somewhat diverse, but share fundamental components. Three are particularly important for the development of God's story:

1. Each Gospel includes the ministry of John the Baptist and presents him as the promised messenger (Isa 40:3 and Mal 3:1) who comes to prepare the way for the King, Jesus of Nazareth.
2. They all demonstrate that Jesus is the fulfillment of all that the Old Testament Scriptures promised. Jesus is not the beginning of a new religion, but came to faithfully complete the mission that Israel could not finish because of their idolatry and hardness of heart (Isa 42, 49, 53).
3. All four Gospels proclaim that Jesus came to restore not only the nation of Israel, but the entire world.

As an example, let's see how the three components manifest themselves in the Gospel of Matthew. From the beginning, it is easy to see that Matthew wants to demonstrate that Jesus of Nazareth is truly the promised Messiah of Israel. In the first 4 chapters, Jesus fulfills the messianic prophecies. Matthew writes that Christ

- comes from the line of David (1:1-17).
- was born of a virgin (1:18-25) in Bethlehem (2:5, 6, 8, 12).
- lived in Nazareth (2:19-23).
- had His way prepared by John the Baptist (3:1-12) (cf. Isa 40; Mal 3-4).
- heard God the Father testify that He was His Beloved Son (3:13-17) (cf. Isa 42, Ps 2).
- was tested and prepared in the desert for His ministry by the Holy Spirit (4:1-11)

After establishing that He is the only one qualified to be the Messiah, Jesus begins His ministry with this declaration: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near" (Mt 4:17). In the following chapters of Matthew, Jesus authoritatively teaches that the Kingdom of Heaven is very different from what we expected.

The most controversial fact of Christ's teaching was that the Kingdom of God is for *all of the nations*—even Gentiles can enter into it. For the Jews, that was a scandalous statement. They did not consider themselves to be a light to the nations. Rather, they expected God to destroy the Gentiles (another name for the nations) and reestablish Israel's reign. Jesus reiterated that God had not changed His plan—Christ came to restore both Israel and the nations.

Matthew includes most of the elements of God's redemptive story in his Gospel. Look closely at the progressive development of the narrative:

1. **The genealogy (Mt 1:1-16):** Matthew demonstrates that Jesus is the direct descendant of Abraham, who was to be a blessing to all of the nations (Ge 12:1-3). It is also striking that this genealogy lists three gentile women (Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth). Why? To show that God's redemptive plan in history has always included the Gentiles.
2. **The Magi worshiped Jesus (Mt 2:1-12):** This account is not found in Luke or Mark. Matthew evidently had a special purpose for including it in his Gospel. The Magi were Gentiles moved by God through the appearance of a star to kneel and worship Jesus as the Messiah. In contrast, Herod "the King of Israel," a Jew, tried to kill Christ.

3. **John the Baptist's prediction (Mt 3:9):** Matthew records John's proclamation that membership in the Jewish race does not necessarily guarantee anyone entry into the Kingdom of God.
4. **A disciple of the Kingdom is said to be the Light of the World (Mt 5:14):** Believers are to be a testimony to all peoples.
5. **The models of extraordinary faith in Matthew are often Gentiles** [a centurion, Nineveh, the queen of the South, a Canaan woman, etc.] **(Mt 8:5-13; 12:41-42; 15:21-28; 27:54).**
6. **Jesus taught that His disciples will be a testimony to the Gentiles (Mt 10:18).**
7. **God's physical reign will not be manifested till the Gospel reaches all of the nations (Mt 24:14).**
8. **God's Kingdom has to do with justice and at the judgment "all of the nations will be gathered before him" (Mt 25:31-33).**
9. **Jesus' last words in Matthew command His disciples to make disciples of all nations (Mt 28:18-20):** Jesus fulfilled His role when He died for mankind's sins and opened the door for reconciliation (Isa 42 and 53). His life and death showed us how to be human and how to faithfully represent God (Php 2:5-11; 1Pe 2:21).

## ACT V: THE CHURCH AND ITS MISSION – THE CHURCH PROCLAIMS THE MESSAGE OF THE KING

Before Jesus ascended, His disciples asked: "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Ac 1:6). Jesus answered: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. <sup>8</sup> But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Ac 1:7-8). The mission of the Church is not to establish Israel's kingdom, but the Kingdom of Jesus which includes Gentiles as well as Jews. This is the message that the church is to preach to ends of the earth.

Paul's preaching in Athens clearly emphasizes the universality of the Gospel:

<sup>24</sup> "The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. <sup>25</sup> And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. <sup>26</sup> From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. <sup>27</sup> God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. <sup>28</sup> 'For in him we live and move and have our being.' As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.'

<sup>29</sup> "Therefore since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by man's design and skill. <sup>30</sup> In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. <sup>31</sup> For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead." (Ac 17:24-31)

In Acts, the Church began to proclaim the Gospel through the power of the Holy Spirit in spite of opposition. From Acts 2:14 until the end of the book we follow the story of the sovereign progress of the Gospel against violent opposition. The Holy Spirit gave the witnesses courage to continue to share the good news and also gave the listeners the ability to believe the radical message.

In the other New Testament writings we see the same commitment to take the Gospel to the ends of the earth (Ro 15:20; Php 1:27-30; Col 4:3). But Paul, John, and Peter remind us that preaching the Gospel is only part of our mission. We must also live the message which we preach!



As God's ambassadors on earth, we must show the world what the Living God is like. We do this by practicing forgiveness, patience, and love in our personal relationships, and by looking out for the interests of others. Paul puts it this way:

*<sup>12</sup> Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. <sup>13</sup> Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. <sup>14</sup> And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity (Col 3:12-14; see also Gal 5; Eph 4; Ro 12-15, 1Pe 2-5).*

## **ACT VI: THE SECOND COMING OF JESUS – THE KING RETURNS TO RESTORE HIS CREATION**

The purpose of the Church is to preach the gospel to all the nations so that they, with us, may eternally worship God. All believers should be motivated to action by the longing to see mankind reconciled to God (Col 1:15-20; Rev 21). Paul's longing is clearly seen in Romans 8:

*<sup>18</sup> I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. <sup>19</sup> The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. <sup>20</sup> For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope <sup>21</sup> that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God.*

*<sup>22</sup> We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. <sup>23</sup> Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. <sup>24</sup> For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what he already has? <sup>25</sup> But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently. (Ro 8:18-25)*

Even though there are many perspectives on the final days, all Christians agree on four fundamental components: 1) The return of Christ to reign over the earth; 2) the resurrection of all mankind; 3) the final judgment; 4) a new earth.

Revelation 21 gives us a glimpse of what awaits the children of God in the new earth. God will wipe every tear from our eyes; there will be no more death or mourning, no more crying, no more pain. The old things will have passed away. God's people will praise the Lamb in sincerity and unity. The nations will walk in His light and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor to Him. This will be the culmination of God's plan—the redemption of the physical and spiritual world and transformed people from every nation worshipping Him for all eternity.

## **CONCLUSION**

1. In light of what we just finished studying, we need to remember that missions is not the end in itself, but rather an important means to the final goal. Pastor and theologian John Piper has said it in the following way:

*Missions is not the ultimate goal of the church. Worship is. Missions exists because worship doesn't. Worship is ultimate, not missions, because God is ultimate, not man. When this age is over, and the countless millions of the redeemed fall on their faces before the throne of God, missions will be no more. It is a temporary necessity. But worship abides forever. (Piper, p. 11)*

2. God initiates the redemption of mankind. He is the One who seeks His sheep that have gone astray (Ge 3; Ro 5:8; Jn 1:1-18). "We love, because he first loved us" (1Jn 4:19). What are the implications for missions? First, Christians, as imitators of Jesus and God, should go to the nations even if they consider us enemies (Ro 5:8; Jn 1:1-18). Second, when we go to the nations, we are going to have to minister cross culturally, like Jesus did (Jn 1:1-18; Php 2.5-

- 11). We must adapt to the people we want to reach and not expect them to change their culture in order to hear the Gospel.
3. The Church must not only preach the Gospel, but must also live it. We are called to reflect the glory of God to the world and to teach and demonstrate how Gospel does and should change people's lives. The Great Commission is not to make believers of all nations, but to make disciples.
  4. The great narration of the Bible tells us that God has a great plan, and that He is going to fulfill His plan even though mankind is unfaithful. Surprisingly, He wants us to participate with Him to accomplish His plan. A missionary to India, Leslie Newbigin, relates an incident which an Erudite Hindu told him:

*I can't understand why you missionaries present the Bible to us in India as a book of religion. It is not a book of religion - and anyway we have plenty of books of religion in India. We don't need anymore! I find your Bible a unique interpretation of universal history, the history of the whole creation and the history of the human race. And therefore a unique interpretation of the human person as a responsible actor in history. That is unique. There is nothing else in the whole religious literature of the world to put alongside of it. (Newbigin, p. 4)*

### **RESOURCES FOR ADDITIONAL STUDIES**

- John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad! The Supremacy of God in Missions*. Baker, 1993.
- Newbigin, *A Walk through the Bible*. Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY 1995.

DELTA COURSE

2

LESSON

# Confronting Culture [10]

## ATTEMPTS THAT FALL SHORT

### ☞ Lesson Purpose

The purpose of this lesson is to examine the weaknesses of three typical ways of controlling behavior. These approaches confront cultural differences instead of transforming them—trying to force behavior and thoughts to conform to an external norm.

### ☞ Main Points

- Secular culture essentially consists of invisible rules that are used to filter acceptable and unacceptable behavior. Since there is no universally-recognized source of authority, these rules vary widely from one people group to another.
- Legalistic Christianity tries to enforce behavior change in a very similar way to secular culture. The main difference is that the Bible is the basis for the rules. However, the motivation for change is usually the external authority of the groups or of its leaders.
- An ethnocentric culture considers anything new or different to be unacceptable or at least suspect. Christian church planters conform to this cultural model when they try to enforce their own cultural preferences on believers in another culture.

### ☞ Desired Outcomes

When the content of this lesson has been mastered, each participant should

- Be able to give a simple definition of culture.
- Understand the similarities between legalistic Christianity and secular behavior control and be able to use Scripture to refute the principles of legalism.
- Develop a stronger personal commitment to laying aside personal preferences in order to more effectively bring the Gospel to people of other cultures.

## INTRODUCTION

In Lesson 1 we saw how important the rich cultural diversity of different people groups is to the ultimate worship of God. However, most people, unfortunately including many church planters, are uncomfortable with these differences. As a result, they may allow secular or unbiblical attitudes about culture to guide their well-meaning attempts to promote righteousness. They confront not only sin, but anything that is different or foreign to their own Christian experience. In so doing, they squelch the growth of the new church and stifle the free expression of worship that God desires.

Some cross-cultural church planters confront not only sin, but anything that is different or foreign to their own Christian experience.

Every culture has its own method of controlling behavior. The meaning and nature of culture will be examined in more detail in Part II of this course. For now, suffice it to say that culture is the pattern for living that every person learns from the people around him. People seldom think about their culture, but it affects everything that they think and do. In the same way, we have been surrounded from birth by pervasive forces that control deviant behavior through external pressure. We will tend to use these same methods unless we are aware of them and consciously act on biblical principles of transformation.

## I. SECULAR BEHAVIOR CONTROL

Local cultures vary greatly from one people group to another. Some may be atheistic while others are deeply religious. Perhaps the only element they share in common is that each group teaches how an individual should live in relation to the group so that the group survives and prospers in their particular environment. In other words, culture is the attempt of the group to control individual behavior in a way that benefits the group. Traditions, rituals, as well as direct instruction, are used to teach successive generations the beliefs, values, and behaviors that have been found to be useful by their ancestors.

Traditions, rituals, as well as direct instruction, are used to teach successive generations the beliefs, values, and behaviors that have been found to be useful by their ancestors.

### A. The “Problem of Evil”

Even unbelievers are aware of the “problem of evil.” They recognize that there seems to be some innate urge in people that causes them to do negative, destructive acts. These behaviors may be as simple as selfishness or as severe as murder and sadism. Even though non-Christians may reject the biblical explanation of sin as the source of these impulses, they know that negative urges exist and must be controlled or they will destroy society. Typically, cultures respond by pressuring their members to, 1) resist and stifle the destructive thoughts and behaviors or, 2) express them only toward people outside the group. The structures that groups develop to deal with these problems become the culture of the group, and they tend to remain even if the motives for their adoption are forgotten over time.

### B. Diverse Environments

Non-Christian cultures vary widely because they do not have a single, universal, objective standard of truth. The only common origin of their cultures is “what has worked for us in the past.” However, since the situation in which each group finds itself may be so different from other groups, their responses vary widely. For instance, a people group surrounded by non-aggressive groups may develop a culture that emphasizes trade in order to acquire items that allow them to live in greater comfort and safety. Conversely, a tribe surrounded by warlike peoples might more likely develop traditions of suspicion and withdrawal from strangers.

Non-Christian groups do not have a single, universal, objective standard of truth. The only common origin of their cultures is “what has worked for us in the past.”

The environment is often the determining factor in the culture of a particular people group. Because the environment of a group is constantly changing, their culture is also continually being modified. However, such cultural modifications tend to happen slowly because change is resisted by the accumulated experience of past generations. Rapid cultural change seldom happens unless the environmental change is severe. For example, the tsunami that recently devastated SE Asia caused many previously closed Muslim communities to gratefully accept Christian disaster relief.

### C. Filtered by Invisible Rules

Local culture functions like an invisible list of rules that describe how to respond in almost any situation. Because every person has a sin nature, we all have similar negative thoughts and actions. Greed, selfishness, lust, hatred, and other emotions are universal. Similarly, the fact that mankind was created in God’s image means we also share positive thoughts of love, kindness, etc. However, local cultures accept, reject, or modify these thoughts in very different ways so that acceptable behavior may vary greatly from one people to another.

Figure 2.1 Behavior Filtered by Culture

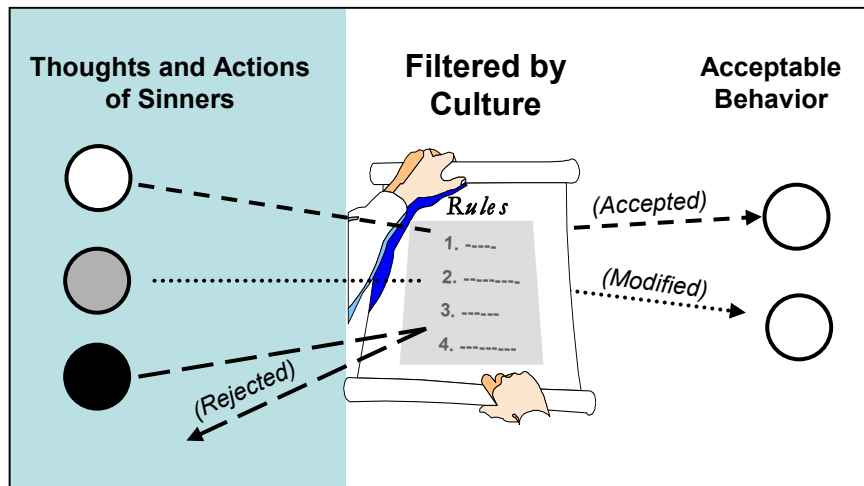


Figure 3.1 illustrates the way culture filters human thoughts and actions. The colors indicate the degree to which each thought is acceptable within the culture.

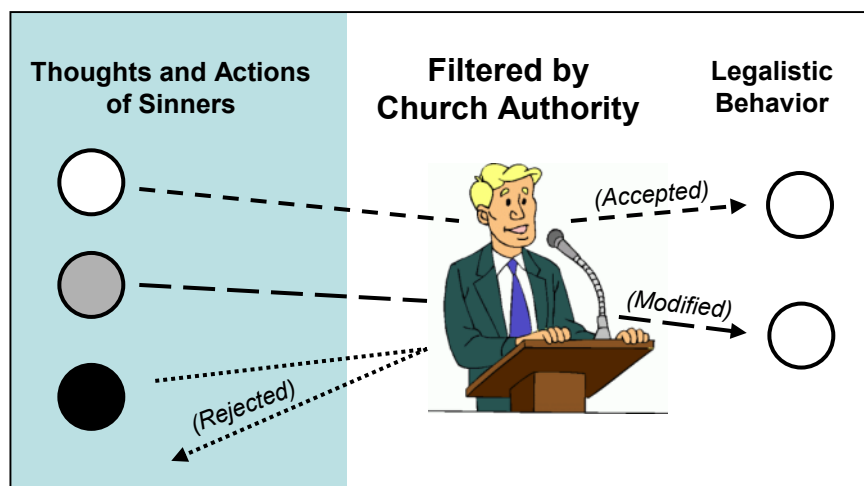
- - ideas that the culture considers to be positive
- (grey) - ideas that the culture believes to be partly negative and partly positive
- (black) - ideas that the culture labels as negative

As the graphic indicates, cultural rules will condemn negative behavior, accept positive ideas, and attempt to modify the actions that it deems to be a mixture of good and bad. The important thing to remember is that these designations vary with every culture and do not necessarily bear any resemblance to biblical standards of right or wrong. Therefore, local culture has no way to bring about change of a sinful heart—only the ability to control some behavior.

## II. LEGALISTIC CHRISTIANITY

Christians usually know that many elements of any secular culture are incompatible with biblical truth and try to correct the errors they see. In too many situations, however, they simply add Christian *content* (biblical commands) to the secular *process* (the list). Instead of moving from behavior control to life change, they substitute *Christian rules* for *secular rules*. Typically, the new rules are introduced and enforced by a church authority. Compare Figure 3.2, which illustrates this approach, to the secular model in Figure 3.1.

Figure 2.2 Behavior Filtered by Church Authority

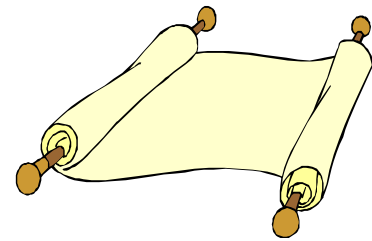


Missionaries and cross-cultural church planters are particularly susceptible to using this method since they often do not understand the local culture. It is much easier to simply “fix” the things that seem “unchristian” rather than to take the time and effort to learn why things are done differently in the new culture. When this shortcut is taken, missionaries or church planters usually use “Christian” rules to try to create a church culture that matches the one from which they came. This almost always creates a superficial veneer of Christian behavior rather than true life change. The result is typically a legalistic church with little vitality which does not fit into the new culture. Like the wrong variety of rice, it is unsuited to the new location and does not thrive or produce significant fruit.

Secular culture is formed over many generations and affects all areas of life. Legalistic patterns of church life that try to replace secular culture find it necessary to continually add new rules in a never-ending attempt to deal with the countless life situations that arise. As a result, legalistic systems soon become overwhelming in their complexity and scope. Although the missionaries or church planters that implement this model usually have good intentions, the method does not work any better than it did for the Pharisees or the New Testament Judiasers (Jewish Christians who wanted to observe the Law of Moses).

### A. The Torah Plus

The Old Testament Law that God delivered to Moses on the mountain is called the **Torah**. We know it as the first five books of the Bible—Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. The purposes of this Law were to convince us that we are sinners and to lead us to Christ (Gal 3:24). Instead, the Jews considered it to be a comprehensive list of rules for living. However, the Law was never intended to be used in this way, and did not cover every possible situation.



The reaction of the Jews was to add to the Law. By the time of Christ an entire system of sayings, oral laws, and traditions had been developed and had become a stumbling block to Israel. They collected these rules into the following groups:

- The **Mishnah** – a written record of the oral law that God supposedly delivered to Moses, but which was not included in the Torah
- The **Talmud** – the teaching and discussion of the rabbis on the various laws, customs, ethics, and history of Israel
- The **Midrash** – a compilation of commentaries and teachings about the Jewish Bible

These collections became huge and unwieldy, and often contradicted themselves or the actual Law of Moses (Mt 15:1-9; Mr 1-13). The opposition of the Pharisees to Jesus was intensified by His teaching that these manmade rules were not equal to the Word of God. In their struggle to preserve their legalistic additions to the Law, the Pharisees rejected the Messiah that the Law was designed to proclaim.

*“They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.’ You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men.” And he said to them: “You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your ‘own traditions!’ (Mr 7:7-9)*

### B. The Problem with Adding Rules

Even the early church struggled with the temptation to impose “Christian” rules in order to cause righteous behavior. Paul flatly and directly told the Colossian church that such legalistic methods **do not work!**

*Since you died with Christ to the basic principles of this world, why, as though you still belonged to it, do you submit to its rules: “Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!”?*

*These are all destined to perish with use, because they are based on human commands and teachings. Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they **lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence.** (Col 2:20-23)*

God not only judges the actions of men, but also their motives. Therefore, the only change that is valuable is one that begins by changing the heart. A major theme of the Sermon on the Mount is that sinful thoughts are as condemning as evil actions (Mt 4-6). Even if a man could control his actions so completely as to never perform a sinful act, he would still be guilty if he had ever had a sinful thought! As Isaiah said, the heart is the key to righteousness:

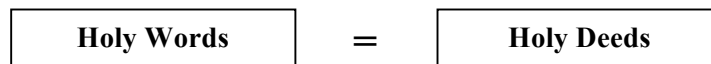
*The Lord says: "These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is made up only of rules taught by men. (Isa 29:13)*

Church planters who desire to establish congregations that please God with their lives and worship must avoid the temptation to focus on controlling negative behavior, or even doing positive things for the wrong reasons. Legalistic Christianity does not work and it does not please the Lord. It is impossible to legislate or enforce righteousness. True holiness must begin with transformed hearts. Emphasis on genuine life change is the only biblical way to make true disciples of the Lord.

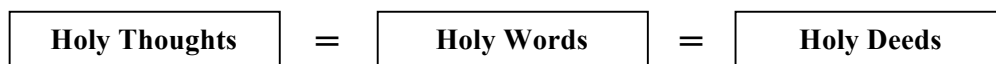
It is impossible to legislate or enforce righteousness. True holiness must begin with transformed hearts.

### C. The Danger of Hypocrisy

Someone might argue that legalism isn't all that bad since it does change behavior. Isn't external righteousness better than unrestrained sin? Jesus consistently reserved His harshest criticism for the "hypocrites"—especially the Pharisees and religious rulers of the day (Mt 6:2; 7:5; Lk 6:42). He was gracious to "sinners" but not to "hypocrites" (Mt 12:34). Christians typically understand hypocrisy to be a mismatch of words and actions. In their view, a model for righteousness might be as follows:



A closer examination of the Christ's response to the Pharisees shows that their *deeds* were sometimes as holy as their *words*. Often, the problem was that their thoughts and motives were evil (Mt 23:23-27). They behaved *righteously*, but their hearts were not *right* (Mr 7:6). This means the model above is incomplete—there are three components to biblical righteousness:



If all three—what we think, what we say, and what we do—do not match, we are hypocrites. Most legalistic Christians know that hypocrisy is evil and would be highly offended to be compared to the hypocrites. However, by definition, legalism tries to change behavior *without changing the heart*. The same evil attitudes and motives remain—as they did in the Pharisees.

### III. ETHNOCENTRIC CHRISTIANITY

Ethnocentric Christians are similar to legalistic Christians in that they try to enforce good behavior and suppress evil actions. However, ethnocentric Christians are more concerned about forcing their own cultural forms on other believers. The root motivation is to eliminate that which is new or unfamiliar. In other words, they derive their understanding of holiness from their own culture rather than from the Scriptures.

- **Legalism** – enforce *good behavior* through external pressure
- **Ethnocentrism** – enforce *personal, cultural preferences* through external pressure

In essence, the legalist says, “holiness is simply doing the right things, because I said so.” The ethnocentrist says, “holiness is doing things the way that I do them.”

### A. Eliminate the Unfamiliar

The unspoken argument of the ethnocentrist is, “I like it, and it works for me, so you should do it the same way.” As such, he is blind to the role that his own culture has played in shaping his preferences. Ethnocentrism elevates personal and cultural preferences to the level of spiritual requirements—even competing with the Word as our authority.

The unspoken argument of the ethnocentrist is, “I like it, and it works for me, so you should do it the same way.”

What ethnocentric Christians forget is that no culture is perfect—not even their own. In the same way, all cultures have some unique values because all people were made in the image of God. When we reject one culture for another, we also reject these important God-given traits. The worldwide body of Christ is weaker as a result. Diversity is a key part of God’s creation.

### B. Wonderful Diversity of Fruit

When you read the word “fruit,” you probably picture a kind of fruit that is common in your area. If you travel, however, you will probably encounter other kinds of fruit. Let’s suppose that you went to a market in another country and bought a basket of local fruit. Some might be so unusual that you might not know how to prepare or eat it. For example, a person who is familiar with bananas might try to peel and eat a plantain raw since it has a similar appearance. He will not enjoy it! As a result, he might decide that he does not like plantains. However, if he is wise, he will ask a local person how to eat them and discover they are delicious when cooked—either boiled or fried—and served with meat, beans, sauce, etc. The visitor needs to learn from the local people.

Figure 2.3 Market Fruit

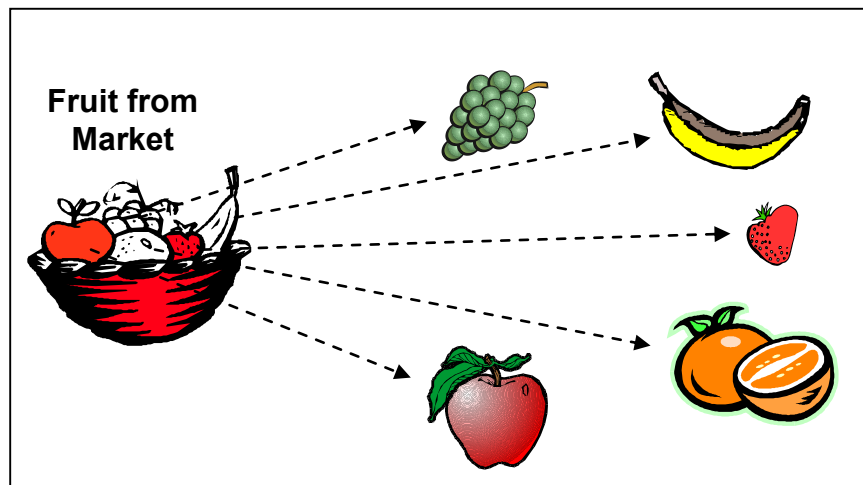


Figure 2.3 illustrates a sample of fruit. You might or might not be familiar with them all, but there are many people who enjoy each of them. Of course, it is not necessary to have variety—it is possible to survive on a very limited diet. But who would choose to merely “survive?” Abundance of choice in foods is the best way to provide the body with a good balance of essential nutrients and vitamins. A severely limited diet is usually a sign of poverty, accompanied by malnutrition. It is rarely a choice.



**Example:**

*One of the benefits, and drawbacks, of travel to other places is the variety of foods. Some people, when faced with new culinary choices, retreat to only the familiar. A Russian friend once spent a full week in the Netherlands eating only apples because the food was unfamiliar to him! A wiser choice would be to take advantage of the opportunity to try new things. You will not like some of them—that's OK. Others may become your favorites. Some of our favorite dishes are Haitian rice and beans, Russian shashlik, Italian pasta, and German pastries. The first solid food that my son liked as a baby was an Indian chicken curry. The list goes on. I can't imagine what our lives would be like without the memories that those dishes and flavors bring to mind. Eating them years later, we remember the places where we first experienced them and the people who introduced us to them.*

**C. All Things to All Men—Not the Reverse**

In Lesson 4, we will look more closely at the Gentile-Jew conflict in the early church. The root of this issue was the insistence of some Jewish believers that Gentiles worship like Jews. The dispute was so great that the first church council was called to deal with the problem (Act 15:1-35). The result of the council was the clear, unambiguous decision that the Gentiles should not be required to adopt Jewish practices in their worship. Ministering in conformity to this principle, Paul stated

*To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. **I have become all things to all men** so that by all possible means I might save some. (1 Corinthians 9:20-22)*

As Paul was evangelizing new regions and establishing new communities of believers, he was careful to conform to their culture (as much as possible without sin) rather than to insist that the new culture conform to his own Jewish preferences and practices. His example should guide the ministry of every pastor or church planter who works cross-culturally. We don't make them change to our culture; we change to theirs.

The biblical teaching on this topic is clear, and will be expanded in Lesson 4. However, the application is never easy. Because we are all human, we are all subject to pride. Every person has within them a tendency to think that their own culture and ways of doing things are best—not just one of many options. We don't automatically lose this prideful attitude when we are saved. We must consciously and continually put off this kind of thinking and put on humility (Col 3:12). Before we condemn the practices of believers in another culture, we need to pray and humbly ask the Lord to show us whether or not He finds them equally acceptable as, or even better than, the way we do things.

**CONCLUSION**

Secular culture is a group's collective understanding of how to promote behaviors that benefit the group and to suppress actions that threaten the group. These cultural norms develop over generations, with the result that the logic behind them may be lost even to the group. Over time, it simply becomes the way to behave in the group. Unfortunately, these cultural principles are almost never founded on the authority of the Word of God, even though some aspects may be similar to biblical principles. Furthermore, the emphasis is almost always on *behavior*, which can be easily monitored, rather than on motives and attitudes. The pressure to conform to the standard is *external*—the heart is usually irrelevant.

Too often, well-meaning Christian leaders use this same approach in their ministry. They try to exert external pressure to conform to Scripture as they understand it. They may reject the secular cultural norms, but they still neglect the heart. They focus on actions, but ignore motives and attitudes. Therefore, they come dangerously close to encouraging the hypocrisy of the Pharisees—their words and actions were holy but their hearts were not right. Clearly, this approach to behavior must be rejected.

Ethnocentric Christians are even farther from the mark. They have such an inflated view of their own culture that they try to enforce it on other believers rather than subjecting both cultures to the Word. They completely reverse Paul's ministry method of "becoming all things to all men" and instead try to make all men like themselves. This prideful attitude robs the body of Christ of the richness and vitality that the cultural diversity of believers should provide. This method should also be rejected by servants of the Lord.

The biblical response to culture must take the heart attitude of the believers and their culture into account. We cannot simply copy the secular principles of our culture. As we will see in the next lesson, the key is not to *confront* culture, but to *transform* it.

### QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION, REVIEW AND APPLICATION

- What are some examples of behavior that most cultures believe to be destructive to the group? How do cultures typically try to discourage these behaviors? How effective are these methods?
- List a few examples of behavior that is acceptable within your culture, but specifically forbidden by Scripture. Why do you think your culture supports those actions? Why do people consider them not be a threat to the larger group?
- Christian legalism can creep in unnoticed. Take some time to reflect on the behaviors that you believe to be sin—are you sure you have a firm biblical prohibition for each of them? If not, they might simply be personal preferences instead of commands from God.
- We are all ethnocentric to some degree—we think our culture is best. What are some specific things that you personally don't like about the culture in which you minister, but that you realize are not wrong—just another way of doing things?

DELTA COURSE

3

LESSON

# Transforming Culture [7]

## GROWING GOOD FRUIT

### ☞ Lesson Purpose

The purpose of this lesson is to explain why the role of the church planter is not to confront local culture through outside pressure, but to lead people into a vibrant relationship with the Lord—with the result that the Holy Spirit guides them into making their own wise cultural choices.

### ☞ Main Points

- The Holy Spirit transforms the hearts and minds of believers. As they grow in the Lord, they will produce spiritual fruit as naturally as a healthy plant produces fruit.
- Christian “fruit” is the result of believers (branches) being attached to the vine (Christ) and drawing spiritual nourishment from Him. The role of the church planter is to enable and encourage that relationship.
- Church planters can authoritatively teach the “black and white” commands of Scripture, but must humbly admit that spiritually-mature local believers who understand local culture are better able to discern right and wrong in “gray” areas of life.

### ☞ Desired Outcomes

When the content of this lesson has been mastered, each participant should

- Explain the biblical analogy of the vine and the branches in John 15.
- Understand the different kinds of “fruit” that believers are expected to produce for the Lord.

## INTRODUCTION

True Christianity affects every area of our lives---both what we believe and how we behave. Since sin has permeated every part of our old nature like a stain soaked throughout a garment, the Gospel must penetrate and cleanse every part of a believer’s life. Believers are told to “put off” these old attitudes and practices and to “put on” new ones (Col 3:5-11).

In the previous lesson, we examined legalistic Christianity’s attempt to accomplish this noble goal through outside pressure. It rarely works, and when it does, it only causes surface change, resulting in hypocrisy. The situation is even more difficult for cross-cultural church planters. They are usually considered to be outsiders who do not fully understand the local culture (which is, indeed, the case). Therefore, they should resist the temptation to teach about culture (which they don’t understand), and instead, teach about our relationship to the Lord (which they do understand). This focus is both wiser and more effective at transforming culture.

### I. SPIRIT-TRANSFORMED LIFE

The Apostle Paul was Roman by citizenship, but a Jew by culture (Act 22:26-8; Ro 9:3-4). When he wrote to the predominately-Gentile believers in Rome, therefore, he was teaching cross-culturally. Rome was saturated with pagan, idolatrous, and sinful practices. How did Paul approach this situation? Rather than list all the ways in which they should do things differently, he urged them to be “transformed.”

*Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but **be transformed by the renewing of your mind**. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will. (Ro 12:2)*

Notice that this transformation occurs **in the mind**, not in our actions. A change in behavior is the **result**, not the **cause** of righteousness. Furthermore, Paul explained that it is this transformation which enables us to discern the difference between actions that are good and those that are not. As our minds are renewed, we may not always do the right thing, but *we will know what it is!*

#### D. Refrain from Judging Actions of Others

A good way to understand what Paul is saying in Romans 12:1-2 is to look at the following chapter to see how he expands on the principle of transformation. The rest of chapter 12 and all of chapter 13 explain what godly conduct looks like in the lives of individual believers. However, all of chapter 14 is devoted to warning Christians not to judge other believers for making different cultural choices!

Christians must not judge other believers for making different cultural choices!

In this chapter, there are five times when Paul specifically commands that we not judge other believers. We are forbidden to judge

1. Their opinions – v. 1
2. What they eat – vv. 2-3
3. The day they worship – vv. 5-6
4. What they drink – v. 17

There are some Christians who would say that some of these choices are sinful. However, this chapter makes it clear that they are not!

#### E. Refrain from Judging Gray Areas

Some actions, such as adultery or murder, are specifically forbidden in Scripture (Ro 13:9). There is no room for disagreement among Christians about these evil actions. God has spoken—our responsibility is to reject these things, and to rebuke and discipline other believers who continue in them (Mt 18: 15-18). On the other hand, there are many actions that Scripture commands us to do. These are always holy and righteous, and all obedient believers should practice these things.

What, then, are we to do with these other activities about which even sincere Christians disagree? Typically, they are referred to as “gray areas” in order to distinguish them from the things that are clearly right or wrong. Most behavior will fall into one of these three categories:

1. **White** – actions that are clearly holy (prayer, worship, loving one another, etc.)
2. **Black** – actions that are clearly sinful (adultery, lying, slander, etc.)
3. **Gray** – actions which are not listed as either right or wrong in Scripture

“Gray” items are the ones which often cause dissention and strife among believers, especially in cross-cultural situations. Generally, peoples’ culture guides their decisions about “gray” actions. Therefore, two people of the same culture will tend to agree about these matters. However, it is equally likely that people from two different cultures will disagree. Unfortunately, two believers who disagree about a “gray” matter may not realize how much their culture influences their choice and how little the Bible contributes to their decision.

Believers who disagree about a “gray” matter may not realize how much their culture influences their choice and how little the Bible contributes to their decision.

## F. Personal Convictions Are the Key

According to Romans 14, decisions about whether these “gray” actions are right or wrong should happen at the individual, personal level. Note the following statements in the chapter:

- “Each one should be fully convinced *in his own mind*.” (v. 5)
- “But *if anyone regards* something as unclean, then for him it is unclean.” (v. 14)
- “So whatever you believe about these things *keep between yourself and God*.” (v. 22)
- “But *the man who has doubts* is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith” (v. 23)

In each of these verses, individuals are responsible to discern good and evil for themselves. If they believe an action is right, it is for them. If they believe it is wrong, it is for them. Again, Paul is talking about the “gray” areas for which we have no clear biblical command. When there is no clear scriptural injunction, the conscience of the individual believer, guided by the Holy Spirit, should decide what is right and wrong.

The freedom of choice in these “gray” areas is uncomfortable for many people who do not like uncertainty. It is hard for them to accept that the same action might be acceptable for one person and sin for another. However, there are several spiritual benefits of trusting one’s conscience in making these decisions:

1. The role of the Holy Spirit in decision-making is magnified.
2. It forces the believer to be in more consistent communion with God.
3. It requires believers to pay attention to their God-given consciences.

## G. Changed from the Inside

It should be clear that the battle for personal holiness occurs in the mind of each believer. Transformation from sin to holiness is an internal process. It is the work of the Holy Spirit in the heart of the individual believer—not the result of manmade rules or external pressure. This does not mean, however, that there is nothing that we can do to help new Christians make good decisions. We don’t simply introduce them to Christ and then stand idly by, hoping for the best. Rather, we must actively encourage them to become disciples. Look carefully again at Romans 12:2, this time with a different emphasis:

The battle for personal holiness occurs in the mind of each believer.

*Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.* (Ro 12:2)

As believers cultivate a deeper relationship with Christ, their transformed minds are able to accurately discern good and evil. They can make good personal choices even in the “gray” areas of life.

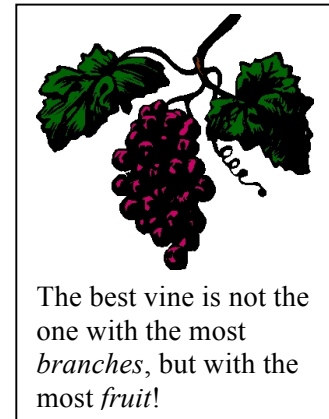
## II. PRODUCING FRUIT

The Bible often uses “fruit” to represent our works, both good and bad (cf. Ps 1:3; Pr 11:3; Mt 7:16-20; Mt 13:23; Jn 15:8; Gal 5:22). We recognize false teachers by the bad fruit that they bear (Mt 7:16, 20), and believers by their good fruit (Jn 15:8). In Lesson 1, we noted that the diversity of fruit is a natural part of God’s creation—revealing to us something about His love of variety. Let’s take a closer look at that image.

## A. Christian Fruit

Fruit is the natural product of a healthy plant. It is the same in the spiritual realm. In John 15:1-8, Jesus explained that believers are like the branches of a vine. If we abide in Christ, we will bear fruit as surely as a branch attached will bear fruit. This is God's plan for us. It is how we can be identified as His disciples. Furthermore, He is not content with a small amount of fruit—He wants us to bear more as we continually grow in Him.

One mistake that church planters commonly make is to confuse “branches” and “fruit.” They focus on having the greatest number of converts. However, these converts are new *branches*, not new *fruit*. Of course God wants more “branches,” but according to John 15, that is not the most important thing. The final goal is more *fruit*. The best vine is not the one with the most *branches*, but with the most *fruit*!



*This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples. (Jn 15:8)*

The vines of which Jesus spoke were undoubtedly grape vines, and the fruit was the grapes. However, there are many, many kinds of grapes—each with unique properties. Carefully mixing the different types yields a wide range of wines, juices, and other products. In the same way, believers in different cultures have unique traits that produce unique fruit (works) for the Lord. Wise church planters will celebrate and encourage this diversity.

## B. The Heart Determines the Nature of Spiritual Fruit

Although diversity in fruit is a good thing, this does not mean that all fruit is good. We all know that this is not the case. Who has not begun to eat or prepare fruit that they assumed was good, only to find that it was not? Likewise, our works (spiritual fruit) are not always good. The New Testament uses four different Greek words to describe possible conditions of our works. They are listed in the table below:

**Table 3.1 Condition of Spiritual Fruit**

Condition of Fruit		
Greek	Translation	Meaning
<i>kalos</i> <sup>1</sup>	<b>Good</b>	No defects
<i>agathos</i> <sup>2</sup>	<b>Beneficial</b>	Imperfect, but usable
<i>sapros</i> <sup>3</sup>	<b>Rotten</b>	Unfit
<i>poneros</i> <sup>4</sup>	<b>Evil</b>	Harmful

### 1. “Good” (*kalos*)

These works are completely righteous, without any trace of sin or wrong motives. They can therefore only be produced by believers. The physical parallel would be delicious, perfect fruit.

<sup>1</sup> καλος

<sup>2</sup> αγαθος

<sup>3</sup> σαπρος

<sup>4</sup> πονηρος

*Likewise every good tree bears **good** fruit . . . and a bad tree cannot bear **good** fruit.*  
(Mt 7:17-18)

2. “Beneficial” (*agathos*)

These works have some value, but are not perfect. They may be tainted by sinful motives, bad attitudes, etc. The physical parallel would be fruit that contains a small amount of worms, bugs, or rotten spots, but still has usable portions. This kind of fruit is also attributed only to believers—nothing produced by unbelievers has any spiritual value to the Lord.

*But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and **good** fruit, impartial and sincere.* (Ja 3:17)

3. “Rotten” (*sapros*)

These works are worthless and of no value to the Lord. The physical parallel would be fruit that is completely rotten, unable to be eaten. Even if it looks good on the outside, the rottenness on the inside makes it unusable. Believers cannot produce rotten fruits, but this is the best that unbelievers can do.

*A good tree cannot bear **bad** fruit . . .* (Mt 7:18a)

*. . . make a tree bad and its fruit will be **bad** . . .* (Mt 12:33b)

4. “Evil” (*poneros*)

These works are worse than useless—they are harmful. The physical parallel would be fruit that is poisonous. It is impossible for a believer to produce these kind of works—they are attributed only to unbelievers.

*. . . a bad tree bears **bad** fruit. A good tree cannot bear **bad** fruit . . .* (Mt 7:17b-18a)

What can we learn from these verses about spiritual fruit? The most important thing to note is that the first two descriptions apply to believers only, while the last two only refer to unbelievers. From this, we can draw two significant principles:

- **Believers** produce works that range from “holy” to merely “beneficial.” Even those that are not completely righteous have some spiritual value to the Lord—nothing they produce is worthless.
- **Unbelievers** cannot produce any works that are acceptable to God. Therefore, trying to urge righteous behavior before salvation is a waste of time.

When we compare these principles to what we know about fruit, it makes sense. A banana plant can form poor bananas or yield disappointingly little fruit, but it can’t produce poisonous berries. In the same way, castor plants and nightshade are always grow poisonous berries—never oranges.

This analogy also points to a problem for cross-cultural workers—the inability of someone not familiar with a particular fruit to know if it is good, bad, or a combination of the two. Again, our experience with fruit highlights the need for practical, personal experience with a plant before making a judgment. Consider the following examples:

- Tomatoes – were once considered by Americans to be poisonous until they found out that Europeans regularly ate them.
- Water-Hemlock – a deadly plant often mistaken for harmless Water-Parsnip
- Eggplant – the fruit is edible, but the leaves, flowers, stems and roots are poisonous.
- Peaches – have edible fruit and poisonous seeds
- Almonds – have edible seeds and poisonous fruit

As these examples demonstrate, it would be foolish to go into a new area and begin to consume native fruits without asking a local person what is and is not safe to eat. The same thing applies to cross-cultural ministry. Unless a practice is explicitly ordained or forbidden in Scripture, only the local believers will fully understand its nuances and implications. For example, music styles, greetings, burial practices, leadership styles, feasts and celebrations, etc. might be completely innocent, or they may be derived from sinful or even demonic foundations. There is no way that a newcomer to a culture could possibly know the roots and meanings of these practices.

Unless a practice is explicitly ordained or forbidden in Scripture, only the local believers will fully understand its nuances and implications.

### III. THE CHURCH PLANTER'S ROLE

Cross-cultural church planters who are confused about their role can hinder the growth of new believers and churches. They must remember who they are and are not. First, they are outsiders—they are not experts in unique spiritual fruit that might be produced by the local believers. The church planters might not recognize the value of these fruits, but each one is important.

The second thing to remember is that the church planter is not the Gardener—Our Heavenly Father is. He will make every believer produce fruit, and will discipline or encourage as necessary so that they produce even more fruit.

I am the true vine, and **my Father is the gardener**. . . . every branch that does bear fruit **he prunes** so that it will be even more fruitful. (Jn 15:1, 2b)

#### A. Connect to the Vine

Since Jesus is the vine and His Father is the gardener, the church-planter's first task is to introduce the lost to them. We help to connect them to the Vine, and as a result, the life-giving water of the Holy Spirit begins to flow through them.

#### B. Teach

Although cross-cultural church planters need to be careful not to establish man-made rules concerning "gray" areas of life, there are many, many "black and white" commands and prohibitions in Scripture. These things are not open for debate—they must be obeyed. Many of these are not obvious to new believers—who would instinctively know that we are to "love our enemies?" Church planters cannot abandon new believers to make their own judgments in areas that are already clearly decided by the Word of God. Discipleship and teaching are vital to the spiritual health of the new believers and the new church.

Church planters must be wise about their teaching in cross-cultural situations. For example, the Bible commands "honor your father and mother" (Eph 6:2). Therefore, we must teach them to *honor them*, even as we are careful to let them decide *how to honor them*. To fulfill the biblical command, they must honor their parents in ways that will be recognized as honor in that culture. In some Muslim cultures, children show respect by not looking directly into their father's eyes as they speak to him. In most Western cultures, this would be understood as avoidance and would be offensive.

We must teach believers to *honor their parents*, even as we are careful to let them decide *how to honor them*.

We can use the example of fruit to illustrate the teaching role of the church planter. We know that rotten fruit is bad, just as sin is bad. However, we may have trouble telling whether a strange fruit is rotten or just ripe enough, just as we may not know if a local action or attitude has a sinful source. Rot is bad. Sin is bad. We can teach that. However, we should be humble about our limitations in detecting rottenness in unusual fruit or in foreign customs. We must trust that the Scripture is powerful enough to bring about any necessary change or conviction.



*For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.* (Heb 4:12)

### C. Counsel

Even though we are not the authority on “gray” areas in other cultures, we still have the right and responsibility as brothers and sisters in Christ to counsel, encourage, discuss, and question local believers about their choices in these areas. For example:

1. We can ask questions—“Why have you made this decision?” “How do you see that fitting into Scripture?” “What is the background of this cultural practice or action?”
2. We can call their attention to verses that we think might be relevant to the issue and allow the Word of God to bear fruit.
3. We can offer suggestions about how these areas have been dealt with by other cultures—not as a rule, but as a form of comparison and discussion.
4. We can encourage them in their relationship with the Lord so that they will be more sensitive to the ministry of the Holy Spirit.
5. We can pray with and for them—that they would have wisdom and discernment to choose good over evil in all things, and to bring glory to the Lord in all they do.



We do not have to be in a position of authority to “spur on another on to love and good deeds” (Heb 10:24). We always have the responsibility to fulfill this ministry to our brothers and sisters in Christ, whether they are of our own culture or of another.

### CONCLUSION

The diversity of fruit illustrates the fact that no one can be an expert on all of the various types of fruit, or on every foreign custom or action. Cross-cultural church planters need to be humble enough to admit that local believers who are spiritually mature will be better able to discern good and evil in their own culture. As outsiders, our responsibility is not to judge for them, but to help them grow in the Lord. We can teach them to obey the “black and white” commands and principles in Scripture, and then counsel and encourage them as their own consciences guide them through the “gray” areas.

All too often, we unintentionally usurp God’s position. We forget that the Father is the Gardener who is responsible for the harvest of Fruit, that the Holy Spirit is the One who brings transformation and conviction from within, and that Christ is the Vine to whom the believers must remain attached. Because they are connected to the Triune God, all believers will produce some good fruit. We need to be careful not to be overly critical or interfere in decisions that are between God and His individual children. We can pray, counsel, encourage, and help, but the Lord is the One who is ultimately in control of the condition and volume of the spiritual fruit that each person produces.

### QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION, REVIEW AND APPLICATION

- What is the most unusual fruit you have ever eaten? What made it so different? How did you respond to it? How might that compare to your reaction to foreign customs?
- Think about your reaction to rot, worms, or other defects in fruit. What is your threshold that would cause you to reject the entire fruit instead eating the good parts?

- What are some of the areas that you consider to be “gray?” How did you distinguish those from “black or white” areas? How confident are you of your ability to know when something is “gray?”
- Do you agree with the statement that the best vine is not the one with the *most branches*, but with the *most fruit*? Why or why not? Do you think it has to be one or the other? How does this affect your thinking about evangelism and discipleship?
- What are some questions that you might ask local believers when you are concerned they might not be making a good choice in a “gray” area? Do these questions sound like they come from the concerned heart of a humble brother or sister and not from an authority that wants to rebuke and correct them?

## **ACTION PLAN**

- Select one foreign custom or activity that you see and begin to deliberately study it from a Christian viewpoint. First, interview people from that culture about the source and background of the custom. Find out what it means to them, why they do it, how they understand it. Identify the things that make the custom different from your own culture. Next, pray and search the Scriptures to see if there are any passages that affirm or contradict the custom. Then, find one or more mature Christians from that culture and discuss (*humbly*) how they understand the custom in light of God’s Word.

## **SOURCES**

- Schwarz, Christian A., *Natural Church Development*, St. Charles, IL, ChurchSmart Resources, 1996.

DELTA COURSE

4

LESSON

# The Early Church and Culture [7]

## GOING TO THE “END OF THE EARTH”

### ☞ Lesson Purpose

The purpose of this lesson is to examine how the early Church implemented Christ’s command to be His witnesses to the “end of the earth” and highlight issues that might impact cross-cultural ministry today.

### ☞ Main Points

- The mission of the Church is to be witnesses of Christ to the entire world.
- The church in Jerusalem, in spite of its strengths, remained a mono-cultural group until persecution drove them out into the world.
- As the church expanded into the Gentile world, it continued to struggle with changing forms in order to become truly multi-cultural.

### ☞ Desired Outcomes

When the content of this lesson has been mastered, each participant should

- Reject the idea that a church can serve the Lord fully without engaging in cross-cultural missions.
- Be able to explain the ways the early church dealt with the conflict between Jewish and Gentile culture in the church.

### ☞ Appendices

- Appendix 4A clarifies the meanings of the terms “mission” and “missions.” Although they are not synonymous, they are often confused. When this happens, cross-cultural ministry tends to be neglected, since it requires more effort than mono-cultural work.

## INTRODUCTION

In the Omega Course, Vision Lesson 8, “The First Advance,” described the rapid and powerful expansion of the Gospel message in Acts. In this lesson, we will be looking at another important part of that expansion—the clash between Jewish and Gentile believers as they struggled to decide how culture should affect the life and worship of a Christian.

### I. THE “MISSION” OF THE CHURCH: ACTS 1

When we refer to the “mission” of the Church, we mean the specific task that the Lord have given to us to accomplish. Immediately before He ascended into heaven, Jesus gave the disciples specific instructions about their responsibility to be His witnesses (Acts 1:8).

*But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. (Act 1:8)*

Table 4.1 below shows the three geographical areas that must be reached with the Gospel. The Jewish disciples would have clearly understood that “Jerusalem” referred to their capital city. “Judea and Samaria” (one phrase—not two locations) were the surrounding Jewish regions, although the Jews in Judea were more devout than those in Samaria. The “end of the earth”

(singular) would have referred to the rest of the world which was mainly populated by the Gentiles.

**Table 4.1 Acts 1:8 in Action**

Acts 1:8 in Action					
Location	Acts Ch.	Geographical	Cultural	Ministry	Effort
Jerusalem	2-7	My city	My people	Local church	Minimal
Judea & Samaria	8-12	My country	My people	Same-culture (home) ministries	More
End of the Earth	9-28	All other countries	Other people	Cross-culture (foreign) <b>missions</b>	Much

Although there were certainly some cultural differences between Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria, they were not nearly as great as those between the Jews and the Gentiles. Witnessing to the Gentile portion of the world required tremendous effort and cultural adaptation.

As Table 4.1 demonstrates, a practical interpretation of Acts 1:8 for a Christian today would take the following forms:

- **“Jerusalem”** – the people in the same city and of the same culture as the local church. They are the people that believers come into contact with on a daily basis and to whom they can witness with little special effort or preparation. The disciples did this naturally (Act 2:42-46).
- **“Judea and Samaria”** – people of similar culture and language that were spread over a larger area. Ministry to them requires some effort to go out from one’s local church, but no significant change of culture or language. It took persecution in Jerusalem to motivate the disciples to leave their home church and Jerusalem and go out to the other Jews in Israel (Act 8:1-8).
- **“End of the earth”** – foreigners. Those who live far away, speak strange languages, and have radically different customs. Reaching them will require significant effort, probably including language study, cultural adaptation, travel, expense, discomfort, and possibly danger. Paul did this at great personal sacrifice (2Co 11:23-28).

The command of Christ and its application seem to be clear. However, their implementation by the early church was anything but smooth. If we look closely at the spread of the Gospel in Acts, we find that the main stumbling block was caused by cultural issues.

## II. AT HOME IN JERUSALEM: ACTS 2-7

Acts 2-7 describe the beginning of the church in Jerusalem—and what a start it was! Even today, most believers marvel at its spirituality and growth. When we want to see an excellent example of community and body life, we need look no further. The Jerusalem church was great, but not in one very important area.

### D. A Model Community

The believers in the Jerusalem church cared for one another and also had an excellent reputation with unbelievers. The early chapters of Acts describe an amazing list of positive characteristics. Imagine attending a local church that featured:

- Teaching by the apostles (2:42)
- Miraculous signs and healings by the Holy Spirit (2:4; 3:6-8; 5:19)
- Unselfish giving and sharing (2:44-45; 4:32)

- Powerful, heartfelt prayer (4:23-31)
- Thousands saved, including Jews from “every nation under heaven” (2:5, 41)

The church was, of course, not perfect. However, even when they had problems, they appear to have dealt with them in godly ways. When Ananias and Sapphira sinned, it was judged quickly and effectively (5:1-11). Persecution by the rulers was met with prayer, joy, and spiritual power (5:41). And when there was grumbling over the treatment of widows, the apostles called the church together to choose godly men to handle the situation (6:1-7). Their response to difficult situations is a model for churches even today.

## E. A Major Flaw

Despite all the wonderful characteristics of the Jerusalem church, it failed to carry out Christ’s very clear command to go to the “end of the earth.” It was, for all practical purposes, only a Jewish church.

### 1. *Mono-cultural from the start*

The church began when the Holy Spirit descended on the 120 Jewish disciples who were meeting together for prayer in Jerusalem (Act 1:15; 2:1-4). By the end of that day, the group had grown by 3,000 (Act 2:41). Although these new converts were from many countries, they were all ethnic Jews who had come to Jerusalem for the Feast of Pentecost (Acts 2:5). The church swelled to about 5,000 men (in addition to women and children) when a large group of people believed when they saw the healed lame man leaping *in the temple*—where only Jews were allowed (Act 3:1-10; 4:1-4).

### 2. *Bias against Greek-speaking widows*

By Acts 6, a problem arose between the Jews from Israel who spoke Hebrew, and those from other countries who spoke Greek. Even though they were all Jewish, it appears that the difference in language led the local Jews to overlook the Greek-speaking Jewish widows when they provided food to this needy group. If they discriminated against fellow Jewish believers because of a language difference, is it any wonder that they neglected to minister to the unbelieving Gentiles?

### 3. *Failure to “send” witnesses*

Consider again that first group of 3,000 converts “*from every nation under heaven*” who spoke the native languages of all of those countries (Act 2:5-11). What a great missionary force to go out into the world—fluent in both the languages and cultures of their home countries, and with established networks of relationships there. And so . . . why didn’t they obey Christ’s command and go? Why didn’t the apostles send them out? This is, perhaps, the most serious missed opportunity in the history of missions.

This is, perhaps, one of the most serious missed opportunities in the history of missions.

### 4. *Failure to “go” as witnesses*

The 3,000 were not the only ones who had unique potential to reach the world—the coming of the Holy Spirit bestowed on the 120 disciples, including the apostles, the ability to miraculously speak the languages of “every nation under heaven” fluently (Act 2:7-11). Cross-cultural workers through the ages who have struggled to learn foreign languages would give anything for that ability! Furthermore, Christ commanded them to wait for this event, and then to go (Act 1:4, 8)! Should not the disciples have taken the arrival of the gift of tongues as the signal to head out to the “end of the earth” with the Gospel message? And yet, Acts records that they stayed in Jerusalem until driven out by persecution some time, perhaps years, later.

### III. A SHORT TRIP TO JUDEA AND SAMARIA: ACTS 8-12

Eventually, a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, forcing the believers to go out into the world. Even then, though, the apostles stayed in Jerusalem (Act 8:1)! The Apostles did not lead—rather, the other men and women went out and preached the Word (Act 8:4). In this section of Acts, we see the Gospel slowly break the bonds of Jewish culture. It was, however, a slow process that required the Lord’s miraculous intervention.

- **Samaria** - The ministry to Samaria was well underway, confirmed by miraculous signs, before the Apostles heard about it and became involved (Act 8:6-7). Even then, they sent only two of their members—Peter and John (Act 8:14). The Samaritans were historically Jewish, but had intermarried with other people groups during the Assyrian Captivity (2Ki 17:23-24). As such, they were regarded by the other Jews as an inferior race. Despite the example of Jesus (Jn 4:9, 27), God had to intervene again to get the Jews to take the Gospel to the Samaritans, even though they were partly-Jewish.
- **The Ethiopian Eunuch** – Once again, it required the intervention of the Holy Spirit. He commanded Phillip to leave his successful evangelistic campaign in Samaria and go down to Gaza to speak to the official. Since the eunuch had been in Jerusalem to worship, we know that he was culturally Jewish even though he was an Ethiopian. After his conversion and baptism, the Holy Spirit miraculously snatched Philip away, confirming to the eunuch the truth of the message. Unlike the original 3000, the eunuch went back home to witness! Finally!
- **Cornelius** – Cornelius was a Roman soldier, but was evidently a convert to Judaism because he is described as “devout and God-fearing” and committed to prayer (Act 10:1). Even so, Peter was reluctant to even enter his house—going only when he received a miraculous vision (Act 10:9-16). In a tiny step of obedience, Peter obeyed and preached to this Gentile convert to Judaism.
- **The Reaction** – Rather than recognize the work of God, the apostles confronted Peter about preaching to the Gentiles (Act 11:1-3)! Instead of encouraging the spread of the Gospel to the next level, they were critical! Fortunately, they were swayed by Peter’s arguments about the miraculous visions and the coming of the Holy Spirit upon Cornelius’ family.

The picture we see in these chapters is not a pretty one. An objective look would say that the apostles resisted fulfilling Christ’s command to go to the Gentiles. They were even upset when Peter finally obeyed, questioning whether even Cornelius, who was a Jewish convert, merited access to the Gospel! Jesus accomplished His purpose, but the Jerusalem church was only a begrudging partner. Certainly, this is not the kind of reputation that any church wants to have.

Jesus accomplished His purpose, but the Jerusalem church was only a begrudging partner. Certainly, this is not the kind of reputation that any church wants to have.

### IV. THE SCATTERED CHURCH: ACTS 9-28

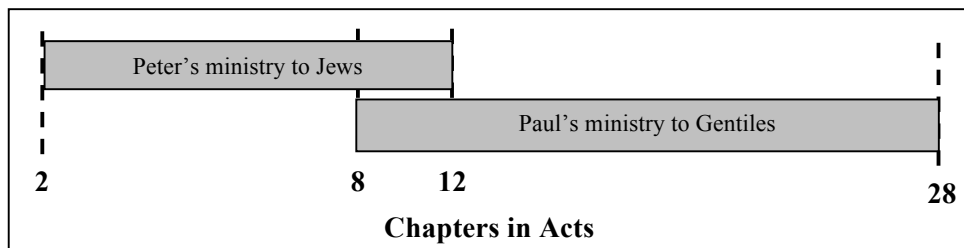
The initial persecution after Stephen’s death drove some of the believers out to Samaria, but not yet to the “end of the earth.” To accomplish this, God sent an even more powerful persecution and chose a new messenger.

#### F. The Apostle Paul Is Chosen to Reach the Gentiles

Even as the Jerusalem church and the Apostles resisted going out to the Gentiles, God was preparing another messenger for that task. Indeed, this is a central theme of the Scripture—God will accomplish His will with or without us. If we refuse to obey Him, He will raise up someone else (Est 4:12-14).

Even before Peter set out on his reluctant ministry to Cornelius, Jesus appeared to the Apostle Paul and commanded him to take the name of the Lord to the Gentiles. (Act 9:1-22). Figure 4.1 below shows how the ministries of Peter and Paul overlapped in chapters 8-12 of Acts.

**Figure 4.1 Overlap of Ministries of Paul and Peter in Acts**



Even though Peter was hesitant about bringing the Gospel to the Jews, Jesus had already declared that He would build His Church on Peter's confession and give the "keys to heaven" to Peter (Mt 16:18-19). Therefore, since the Church is made up of both Jew and Gentile, Peter would be the one to introduce the Gospel to both groups. Peter himself testified that God fulfilled that promise:

*After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them: "Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the **Gentiles** might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. (Act 15:7)*

Peter might have been first to preach to the Gentiles, but Paul quickly surpassed him in that ministry. Although Paul was deeply concerned for his fellow Israelites, God chose to use him in ministry to the Gentiles (Ro 9:1-4; Act 22:21). Paul clearly explained to the Galatian church his responsibility to reach the Gentiles:

*On the contrary, they saw that I had been entrusted with the task of preaching the gospel to the **Gentiles**, just as Peter had been to the **Jews**. For God, who was at work in the ministry of **Peter as an apostle to the Jews**, was also at work in **my ministry as an apostle to the Gentiles**. James, Peter and John, those reputed to be pillars, gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship when they recognized the grace given to me. They agreed that we should go to the **Gentiles**, and they to the **Jews**. (Ga 2:7-9)*

Although it is clear that God chose Paul to carry out the ministry to the Gentiles, it is impossible to decide whether or not this happened because of the failure of the other apostles to effectively reach the "end of the earth."

### G. The Center of Ministry Moves to Antioch

Along with a new messenger, Jesus also chose a new sending base to take the Gospel to the "end of the earth." Some of the persecuted believers fled as far as Antioch (Act 11:19). However, they still did not understand the importance of preaching to the Gentiles—not surprising since their leaders just figured this out in the preceding verse! Fortunately, there were a few Christians who were less prejudiced against the Gentiles and began preaching to them, resulting in mass conversions (Act 11:20-21). It is important to note that this watershed event was caused not by the church leaders, but by faithful laymen who obeyed the Lord.

This watershed event was caused not by the church leaders, but by faithful laymen who obeyed the Lord.

When the Jerusalem church heard that the Gospel had reached the Greeks in Antioch, they sent Barnabas to investigate—not one of the apostles (Act 11:22). And when Barnabas needed help, he did not ask the apostles, but went to Tarsus to find Paul (Act 11:25-26). The next events in Acts are the persecution of the apostles and church leaders in Jerusalem in chapter 12, and the shift of the ministry center to Antioch in chapter 13.

## H. The Holy Spirit Sends Out Missionaries

It is interesting that the Book of Acts tells us so little about the church in Antioch—especially since we have so many details about the Jerusalem church. The first few verses of chapter 13 tell us the names of the leaders, and that they sent out Paul and Barnabas as missionaries as the Holy Spirit commanded them. Otherwise, we know almost nothing about the church.

Even this might be a lesson for us. The weakness of the Jerusalem church was its focus on itself. Even today, many Christians consider it a model for their own churches, not recognizing its weakness in missions. By contrast, about the only thing we know about Antioch was that it sent out missionaries!

About the only thing we know about Antioch was that it sent out missionaries!

In order to draw a fair comparison to the Jerusalem church, we should also note that the Antioch church did not send out missionaries until the Holy Spirit commanded them to do so. Should they not have done this sooner? It would seem that they also, having received the Gospel, were enjoying their new relationship with the Lord, and did not automatically seek to reach the “end of the earth.” Perhaps they did not understand that the “end of the earth” did not refer to a group of Gentiles, but to “every nation” (Mt 28:18-19). At least they responded whole-heartedly when the Holy Spirit clarified their responsibility (Act 13:2-3).

Another interesting fact is that the Holy Spirit called out two of the most prominent leaders in the church—Barnabas and Saul. Antioch was reached by laymen, since the apostles and leaders of the Jerusalem church remained in Jerusalem. We cannot know if the leaders of the Antioch church might have also remained at home—the Holy Spirit did not give them that option. The Lord blesses laymen in missions, but He also desires to use the most gifted believers in this most important of tasks.

Chapters 13 and 14 describe a powerful ministry of the Gospel to an ever-expanding region. The Lord powerfully confirmed the message of Barnabas and Saul and many people believed. This does not mean the ministry was easy—they suffered much opposition and irate Jews even tried to kill Paul by stoning (Act 14:19)! Furthermore, their helper, John Mark abandoned them (Act 13:13). Not everyone is able to handle the stresses and challenges of cross-cultural ministry! But by the time they finished their journey, the Antioch church had a number of new daughter churches throughout Galatia!

## I. The Jerusalem Council

We have already seen how difficult it was for the Jews to accept the fact that a Gentile could be saved (Act 11:19). Even then, they struggled with whether faith alone was sufficient for salvation, or if the Gentiles had to become Jews in order to be truly saved. Those who held the latter position were called the Judiazers. When some of them came to Antioch and taught that the Gentile believers must be circumcised, Paul and Barnabas sharply disagreed (Act 15:1-2).

To the Jews, circumcision was more than just a physical act—it was the sign of a commitment to become Jewish and to live by Jewish laws and customs. The Judiazers, therefore, expected the Gentiles to leave their culture and adopt Jewish culture. The purpose of the Jerusalem Council was to resolve this dispute.

To the Jews, circumcision was the sign of a commitment to become Jewish and to live by Jewish laws and customs.

The decision of the Jerusalem Council was clear—all believers, regardless of their culture, are saved by grace (Act 15:9-11). Nothing further was required for salvation. However, they did exhort the Gentile believers to do two things:

1. Abstain from idols and immorality

Freedom from sin is not license to live however we desire. The fact that we are saved should never be used as an excuse to continue in sin (Ro 6:1-2). Although we are not



under the Law of Moses, we are subject to the Law of Christ. We have a responsibility to behave in ways that honor our Heavenly Father and to strive to obey Him in all things. Idolatry and immorality are never right in the eyes of God. The Council charged the new Gentile believers not to engage in these things (Act 15:20, 29).

## 2. Avoid *appearance* of immorality

The second part of the Council's decision was that the Gentile Christians should avoid offending the Jews in their cities by eating things that they considered detestable (Act 15:20-21). It is important to note that the justification for this command was that the Law of Moses was revered in "every city." Just as the Jews had been expected to preach the Gospel to the Gentiles, the Gentile believers were also expected to witness to the unbelieving Jews. To minister to this group effectively, they would have to lay aside some of their rights by not eating things that were offensive to Jews. Paul explained to the Corinthians how he put this into practice in his own ministry.

*Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. **I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some.** (1Co 9:19-22)*

These two items in the decision of the Jerusalem Council are significant principles for cross-cultural church planters today. They are important enough to set them out in Figure 4.2 below.

**Figure 4.2 Two Principles from the Jerusalem Council**

- 1. Don't participate in immoral behavior (forbidden in Scripture) even though the local culture considers it acceptable.**
- 2. Don't do things that the culture to whom you witness considers immoral just because they are acceptable in Scripture.**

These two principles appear to be timeless absolutes in cross-cultural ministry. We see them consistently applied in every situation by Paul and other New Testament missionaries. In New Testament times, pagan cultures were often accepting of immoral sexual behavior, idolatry, prostitution, fortune-telling, etc. Paul firmly spoke against all of these practices and others. Freedom in Christ does not mean freedom to sin, and sin is not determined by culture, but by the Word of God.

At the same time, Paul often laid aside his rights in order to not offend the people to whom he ministered. Very soon after the Jerusalem Council decided circumcision was unnecessary, Paul circumcised Timothy so that they could more effectively minister to the Jews (Act 16:1-3)! Modern cross-cultural missionaries and workers often need to limit what they eat and drink, how they dress, the way they wear their hair, their gestures, etc. in order to not offend the lost.

## J. Missions Continues

In the rest of the Book of Acts, we see the Gospel spread throughout the Roman world. There were many strategies, challenges, and persecutions, as well as successes. Paul walked carefully and approached each audience with tact and insight. Many responded to his preaching, and many churches were planted.

Even Paul, however was not able to avoid all cross-cultural conflict. In Acts 21, despite his careful preparations to appease the Jews, they falsely accused him of violating their customs. When Christianity confronts culture, some conflict will be unavoidable. However, if we walk wisely, we have the assurance that God will use even conflict for His glory. In Paul's case, his arrest in Jerusalem was God's way of delivering Paul directly to Rome to testify there!

## CONCLUSION

The intent of this lesson is not to disparage the Jerusalem church. In many ways, it was a model church. Even today, we should imitate their zeal for reaching their city, their compassion, their sharing, and their faithfulness in persecution, among other positive traits. However, we must be careful not to fall into the trap of being so involved at home that we neglect to witness to the "end of the earth." Missions is perhaps the most important task of the Church. It is, essentially, the only thing that we know the Antioch church did well, and yet this alone seems to be the reason that Antioch replaced Jerusalem as the most important church in the Book of Acts.

Throughout the pages of Acts, we see cross-cultural prejudices and attitudes revealed. The Jerusalem church had to be forced out into the world by persecution, and even then, most of the ministry was instigated by laymen rather than by the apostles and church leaders. Eventually, God chose a new messenger, the Apostle Paul, to get the Gospel to the Gentiles. Reviewing this drama, as well as Paul's methods in Acts, we can state with confidence that believers must:

- Go – take the message of the Gospel to the "end of the earth"
- Be careful not to let the influence of ungodly culture lead us into sin
- Avoid offending unbelievers by behaving in ways that they consider immoral
- Trust God when unavoidable cross-cultural conflict happens

## QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION, REVIEW AND APPLICATION

- In the culture where you minister, what are some things that are considered by unbelievers to be immoral, and yet not defined as such by Scripture? Attitudes? Behaviors? Dress?
- What changes could you make in your ministry methods or personal life that would cause people from the culture where you minister to consider you to be a moral example?
- What are some examples of things considered acceptable in the culture where you work, but forbidden by God's Word? That is, in what areas must you resist compromise, even if it leads to conflict?

## ACTION PLAN

- Interview several unbelievers from the culture in which you minister. Ask them to describe how they think a highly-moral person would look and act. Who receives their respect as positive spiritual examples or as good people? Then evaluate whether some of those characteristics could/should be part of your ministry.
- Also interview unbelievers from the culture in which you minister to find out what actions and attitudes they believe are inappropriate for a moral person. Look for examples of behaviors or attitudes that would hinder their acceptance of a spiritual messenger, and as a result, interfere with their receptivity to the message of the Gospel. Reflect on whether you need to make some changes to your lifestyle and ministry approach in order to become an acceptable minister to these people.



## "Mission" and "Missions" [4] TO THE END OF THE EARTH

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### INTRODUCTION

In many languages, the words "mission" and "missions" look very similar and are sometimes used interchangeably by Christians. However, when we fail to notice the distinction between them, we lose something important.

#### I. MISSION

The word "mission" is used in religious and secular contexts to refer to a task to be accomplished or a goal to be achieved. The Great Commission is the primary "mission" of the Church—to make disciples everywhere, both at home and abroad. This was the final command of Jesus in Matthew 28:18-20 and Acts 1:8. "Mission" is a broad, all-encompassing word for our divine assignment.

#### II. MISSIONS

Historically, the word "missions" has been used in a more specialized sense. It referred specifically to cross-cultural ministry to people in another country. Actually, the term has never been a perfect one since people of different cultures have never been neatly divided by national borders. Nonetheless, it conveyed the idea that many of the unbelievers we are to evangelize are separated by significant geographical, political, and cultural barriers. They will not be reached in normal daily activity—converting them will require special effort on the part of the Church.

Historically, the word "missions" referred to cross-cultural ministry to people in another country.

"Missions" is no longer universally understood as ministry to foreign peoples. Increasingly, missions is being redefined as the evangelization of any lost person—whether near or far. It is becoming common to hear that every believer is a "missionary" since the "mission field" is everywhere. This change has had the positive effect of making more Christians aware of the need to reach the lost around them and to be more actively involved in evangelistic and discipleship ministry. However, when everyone is a "missionary," no one is a "missionary" in the special sense of being sent out to distant lands for cross-cultural ministry to foreign peoples.

Defining "missions" more narrowly as cross-cultural ministry helps the local church to focus on the entire lost world. It is normal human nature to pay more attention to the people we see around us every day (Jerusalem) and those who are like us (Judea and Samaria), and to forget about people who are far away and different from us. It is even more difficult to actually do something about the spiritual need of these distant people when we know it will require major effort and sacrifice on our part to do so.

### CONCLUSION

When "missions" loses its status as a unique, vital part of the "mission" of the church, it will often be replaced with same-culture evangelism and discipleship. The light of the church may continue to shine brightly in "Jerusalem" but be barely visible at the "end of the earth."

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DELTA COURSE

5

LESSON

# The Spread of the Church into New Cultures [5]

## CULTURE'S EFFECT ON MISSIONS

### ☞ Lesson Purpose

The purpose of this lesson is to give the participant an understanding of the way in which cultural issues affected the spread of the Church throughout history.

### ☞ Main Points

- By 300 AD, the small church at Jerusalem had expanded to include perhaps 10 percent of the Roman Empire.
- The history of the European Era shows that Christianity and political force do not mix well.
- During the Colonial Era, the church expanded around the world, but was unfortunately mingled with European culture.
- Today, the challenge for missions is to find creative and effective methods to reach both urban areas and hidden peoples while keeping the important cultural traits of each group.

### ☞ Desired Outcomes

When the content of this lesson has been mastered, participants should:

- Know the major eras of missions outreach to the world.
- Understand the toxic affect that political agendas have had on the spread of the Gospel into new cultures.
- Be able to describe some of the significant cultural issues that modern missions must address in order to fulfill the Great Commission.

## INTRODUCTION

In the Great Commission, Jesus commanded believers to make disciples of “all nations” (literally, “*every ethnic group*”). He also promised, “I will build My church” (Mt 16:18). Almost two thousand years have passed since then. What progress have we made in spreading the Gospel? How did Christianity first come to your region? What can we learn today from those who have spread the Gospel before us? These are questions that concern Church history.

In this lesson, we will briefly review the expansion of the Church from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth. However, we will specifically examine how cross-cultural issues affected the task of missions. What did former missionaries do right, and what did they do wrong? Hopefully, we can learn from their experiences in order to be more effective ministers of the Gospel today.

### I. THE MEDITERRANIAN ERA: AD 75-500

The spread of the Gospel can be summarized by four major eras. In each of these times, the Church grew significantly in a new part of the world. The first of these was the Mediterranean era, during which the small church at Jerusalem grew to be the dominant religious force in the entire Mediterranean area.

## A. The Early Church

Lesson 4, we discussed the spread of the early church during the time of the Apostles. By the end of Acts, the Gospel had reached from Jerusalem to Rome, with churches across Asia Minor in between. However, these few small churches can better be described as a “toehold” rather than as a pervasive presence. What they lacked in *quantity*, however, they made up for in *quality*.

Most of the early Christians in these churches were poor and uneducated. Many were slaves. They lived simple Christian lives, gathering in homes or private places for worship and caring for one another in natural ways without fancy programs, professional leaders, or church buildings. Christianity spread during this time through the natural witness of average believers. Christians were noted for purity, in stark contrast to the immorality of the day. They were often severely persecuted by the ruling Roman authorities who considered all those who refused to worship the Emperor to be traitors. Countless thousands lost their lives as martyrs for the faith during this time.

Gamaliel wisely said that Christianity would fail if it was only of human origin, but that it would be unstoppable if from God (Act 5:38-39). The Lord used the testimonies of these authentic, Spirit-filled believers to convict even their persecutors. As the Church stood up against the pagan culture around them, the Gospel spread rapidly throughout the Roman Empire. By almost anyone’s evaluation, the Church has never been as strong or as spiritual as during this period of time.

## B. Conversion of Constantine

The face of Christianity changed dramatically in AD 313 when Emperor Constantine issued the Edict of Milan, which guaranteed religious freedom for all and ended the persecution against the Christians. Soon after, Constantine announced that he had become a Christian. Whether the conversion of Constantine was genuine is not clear. However, the Edict of Milan and Constantine’s profession of faith greatly changed Christianity. For example, before the edict of Milan, Christians tended to stay out of public life and refused to serve in the army or work for the government, which they considered worldly, and in some cases, evil.

After the Edict of Milan, nominal Christianity (Christian in name only) grew and “Christians” began to be active in all branches of the government and every aspect of society. By 375, Christianity became the official religion of Rome. Gradually the Empire and the church became interwoven, resulting in what is called the Holy Roman Empire. This title is ironic, in that the “holiness” of Christianity was steadily diluted by the inclusion of nonbelievers and nominal Christians in the churches. Whereas persecution scared away the uncommitted, political power attracted them. The Church grew “roots” instead of “wings.”

## C. The Church Fathers

The rapid expansion of the church in the first few centuries created an environment in which heresies could easily spread. One of the main needs of the early believers during this time was the clarification of theology based on Scripture. This task was taken up by the church fathers. Great intellectuals like Clement of Rome (?-100), Ignatious of Antioch (?-107), Polycarp (69-140), Clement of Alexandria (150-220), Irenaeus (130-200), Tertillian (160-215), Origin (185-254), Athanasius (293-373), Basil (330-397), Ambrose (340-97), Augustine (354-430), Chrysostrom (347-407), Jerome (345- 420) and many others, were the first ones to spell out the doctrines that the church still considers to be foundational today.

This theological movement was an important component of the vitality of the persecuted church. In those days, good doctrine helped the believers retain their faith and live godly lives in difficult situations. However, with the advent of the Holy Roman Empire, the emphasis gradually shifted from theology for life-change to theology as a way to measure orthodoxy. Correct doctrine was the path to status in the state church.

## D. The Church Councils

When there was theological disagreement in the early church, church fathers and leaders would meet to discuss the issues and make decisions. Seven main councils were held in Nicaea in AD 325, Constantinople in 381, Ephesus in 431, Chalcedon in 451, Orange in 529, and again in Constantinople in 553 and 681. The main subject of these councils concerned Christology—the deity, humanity and will of Jesus Christ.

These councils also had the effect of bringing unity to the church. As important as this was, the emphasis was on the facts that Christians believe, rather than on the way that they should live. Good doctrine is essential and *should* lead to godly lives, but this was not always the case. During this time, the important balance of Christian belief and Christian walk faded.

## E. Lessons Learned

Historians estimate that by AD 300 perhaps 10% of the people in the Roman Empire were considered Christians. After the Edict of Milan, this percentage grew higher as Christianity slowly became the state church. However, one wonders how many Christians were actually believers. As Christianity became popular, missionary and evangelistic efforts died out and personal commitment to Christ came to be seen as less important. In short, many people outwardly converted to Christianity without changing their real beliefs. Because of this, it has been said that Christianity converted the Roman Empire and then the Roman Empire perverted Christianity through syncretism. We see from this that a state church tends to spread an external, cultural form of Christianity (nominal Christianity) but not the true faith. And even if the doctrine is correct, emphasis on life-change tends to be weak.

Christianity converted the Roman Empire and then the Roman Empire perverted Christianity through syncretism.

## II. THE EUROPEAN ERA: AD 500-1600

In the next era, Christianity spread northward from the Mediterranean into the pagan tribes of Western and Eastern Europe. This expansion was arguably inspired by a desire to spread the influence of the Holy Roman Empire over a wider geographical area as much as by the conviction to spread the Gospel. At the same time, the forces of Islam steadily overcame the vibrant centers of Christianity in northern Africa. In both cases, the political power of the state shaped the way the Gospel was presented and defended.

### A. Converting the Tribes

Christianity spread northward from the Mediterranean world through the slow conversion of the animistic tribes and peoples that occupied the continent of Europe, particularly between 400 and 800 AD.

#### 1. *Western Europe*

The Gospel was spread through Western Europe primarily by monks who risked their lives to enter the pagan, barbarian tribes.

- St. Patrick (390-461) escaped from slavery in Ireland and returned to preach in both Ireland and Wales.
- St. Augustine ministered in England.
- St. Willibrord and Boniface (680-754) established the church in the Netherlands.
- Ansgar was responsible for reaching Scandinavia with the Gospel.

These missionaries typically established monasteries in each country, which became a core part of Christianity in those areas. In some way, they are similar to the missionary compounds which would become common in 20<sup>th</sup> century missions—with similar strengths and weaknesses. These monasteries provided necessary bases for ministry, but they also made it apparent that Christianity was an “imported” religion. They emphasized

the foreign hierarchy of the church, and its connection to Rome and the Pope. This, along with the insistence that the Scriptures remain in Latin instead of the local languages, influenced the people's view the Gospel and often lead to syncretism rather than truly transformed lives. The believers were often more of an extension of the power of Rome than communities of indigenous worshippers.

## 2. *Eastern Europe*

By AD 800, Christianity was well established in Western Europe. During the next two centuries, the believers finally reached out into Eastern Europe. Again, the main laborers in this expansion of the church were the monks.

- Cyril and Methodius converted the Moravians to Christianity.
- Methodius then took the Gospel to the Serbs.
- Disciples of Methodius went on to reach Bulgaria.
- With the conversion of Vladimir of Kiev in 989, Christianity extended into modern day Ukraine and Russia.

Perhaps the most important factor in the conversion of Eastern Europe was the change in language of the church. When Cyril and Methodius ministered in Moravia, they spoke Slavonic, the local language, and translated the liturgy into that language. As they and their disciples spread Christianity through Eastern Europe, they affirmed the use of this "old Slavonic" rather than insisting on Latin as their counterparts in Western Europe had done. This accelerated the spread of the Gospel and the acceptance of Christianity by the local people, but also brought them into conflict with the Roman church which approved only of Latin. This choice of language sowed the seeds of the later division of the Orthodox Church from the Roman Catholic Church.

## **B. Encounter with Islam**

A new religion emerged on the Arabian Peninsula led by Mohammed (570-632), who claimed to have received a special revelation from God in 610. Mohammed built on some basic truths from Christianity and Judaism and preached the worship of one God—Allah. Before his death most of the Arabian Peninsula had become his followers. Between 636 and 661 Islam conquered the entire Middle East and began to move across northern Africa and into Spain with what seemed like unstoppable force. The spread of Islam halted in 732 when Mohammed's followers were defeated at the Battle of Tours.

To this day, there is considerable debate about why Islam was able to virtually stamp out Christianity in many areas that previously had vibrant churches—particularly in North Africa, which had been one of the centers of Christian scholarship and apologetics. How could the church, which had grown rapidly under Roman persecution, so quickly fold under Muslim persecution?

By looking at areas such as Egypt, where Christianity did survive, some scholars believe that the church resisted Islam when it was deeply rooted among the local people—using the local language and drawing on the local population for leadership. Many of the areas of Africa where the church did not survive were "Romanized"—centered among the European-leaning population and considered to be foreign to the local people.

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## **C. The Crusades**

The spread of Islam led to a series of wars against Muslims by the Holy Roman Empire. So many of the Christians in the Middle East had converted to Islam and so many of the holy sites had been lost that the Christians in the Western part of the Mediterranean organized

armies to forcefully reclaim holy sites and reestablish Christianity as the dominate religion of the region. There were seven such crusades between 1095 and 1291, all of which failed to retake any ground for more than a few years. Furthermore, some of the crusades actually attacked Christian cities rather than defending Christianity. Even when focused toward the Muslim “enemies,” the bloodthirsty way in which the crusades were carried out is difficult to justify in light of the Gospel message.

This effort was clearly not missions. While the crusaders may have believed that they were spreading Christianity, they succeeded only in creating obstacles to the Gospel for millions of people which last to this day. Efforts to win Muslims to Christ through a genuine, loving witness were undertaken by Francis of Assisi (1181-1226), who went to Syria and by Raymond Lull (1232-1315), who went to North Africa. These faithful men probably accomplished more for the Lord than all of the crusading armies.

#### D. East-West Schism

Early in the Roman Empire the Greek-oriented East and the Latin-oriented West developed very different cultures. Invading European tribes weakened the Western Empire, while the Eastern Empire (also called the Byzantine Empire) had to deal with the influence of Islam. Likewise there were significant power struggles and philosophical differences between Constantinople and Rome. These differences intensified through the centuries and led to the official split in 1054. Today we know the Western Church as the Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Church as the Eastern Orthodox Church.

This very public division of the church culminated in the sacking of Constantinople by Rome in the Fourth Crusade in 1204. The enmity that resulted between the Catholic and Orthodox Churches has not yet been fully healed. As a result, many parts of the world believe that Christianity is mainly about political power, revenge, and conquest. Disciples who seek to minister in areas that were most affected by these events must understand these difficult historical issues and walk carefully and wisely.

Many believe that Christianity is mainly about political power, revenge, and conquest.

#### E. The Protestant Reformation

Much of what we are calling the European era was a very dark time for the church. The spread of Islam also took a toll. Likewise, the state-church relationship proved only to weaken spiritual vitality and corrupt the leaders. Those who spoke out against the corruption were normally put to death. But on October 31, 1517 a young German monk named Martin Luther (1483-1546) began to publicly protest against many of the church’s errors, such as the infallibility of the Pope, the teaching that salvation could be earned and the failure to base doctrine on the Scriptures. He was followed by Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531), John Calvin (1509-1564), John Knox (1514-1572) and others who took a similar approach to theology.

While the reformers set out to reform the state church, their protests led not to reformation but to whole new denominations of churches such as Lutheran, Reformed, Presbyterian and others. On the one hand, this helps to explain why there are so many different kinds of Christianity today. On the other hand, it accentuates the idea in the minds of many that Christianity is divisive. Contemporary Christian missionaries cannot change history, but they must be able to explain the discrepancy between the divisions in the church and the words of Jesus to His apostles:

*May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. (Jn 17:23b)*

#### F. Anabaptist

The Anabaptist is a smaller movement that rose up at the same time as the Reformation. Led by Conrad Grebel (1492-1526), Felix Manz (1498-1527) and Menno Simons (1496-1526), the Anabaptist considered infant baptism to be illegitimate, and they were all re-baptized as adults to show their commitment to Christ. Thus they were named Anabaptist, which meant “re-



baptizers.” Their insistence on changing this foundational church form caused significant controversy—religious forms are often held even more deeply than doctrine.

While they were in agreement with many teachings of the reformers, they took the ideas even further—disagreeing not only over baptism, but also teaching separation from the world (the state) and pacifism. This movement led to the formation of Mennonite, Brethren and Baptist churches.

### G. Lessons Learned

Believers made several mistakes as they sought to spread the Gospel in the European Era. First, they allowed Christianity to be mixed with political force. This combination attracted nominal Christians and even unbelievers into the church and resulted in the spiritual decline of the Holy Roman Empire. It also led to the Crusades, which still cause Muslims to be among the least receptive to the Gospel. Second, they were slow to translate the Scriptures and church worship into the languages of the people, hindering discipleship and weakening the churches in the face of heresy and Islam.

While there were many dark times during the European era, God was still at work. A number of monks faithfully went out to preach the Gospel in love in pagan lands. Some defied Rome in order to teach in languages and ways that were understandable to the people. The reformers challenged the idea of salvation through the hierarchy of the church instead of by personal faith. And the Anabaptists were willing to separate themselves from the state and to adopt church forms that clearly communicated the content of the Gospel.

While there were many dark times during the European era, God was still at work.

## III. THE COLONIAL ERA: AD 1600-1900

In the next era, Christianity spread outward from Europe into the rest of the world. As in the European Era, however, the historical record is mixed—there were profound mistakes as well as great progress toward making disciples of all nations.

### A. European Dominance

During this time the countries of Spain, France, Portugal, Holland and England became world powers and established colonies in Africa, Asia and the Americas. As a part of this conquest, they also often promoted Christianity as a way to “civilize” the indigenous people. During this time forced baptism was common and Christianity was equated with European culture. In other words, things like eating European food, speaking European languages and wearing European clothes were equated with civilization and with Christianity.

The native people typically responded to the imposition of Christianity in one of two ways: 1) they publically submitted to Christian rituals while privately maintaining their former beliefs, or 2) they blended Christianity and their former religion into one new syncretistic system of beliefs. These responses resulted in weak or hypocritical “Christians.” Rather than being transformed by the Gospel, these people changed the Gospel into a form that would fit into their existing worldview. Unfortunately, many of these deficient churches still exist today, and continue to hinder the Gospel from penetrating their cultures.

Rather than being transformed by the Gospel, these people changed the Gospel into a form that would fit into their existing worldview.

### B. Pietism

The Protestant Reformation continued to develop, transforming Europe and the world well into what we are calling the colonial era. However, while the Protestant Reformation corrected theology, it did not always impact spirituality. This vacuum paved the way for the pietistic movement. The pietistic movement began in Germany under the leadership of Philip Spener (1635-1705), a Lutheran pastor, and later under August Francke (1663-1727). Pietists emphasized a personal piety growing out of a genuine conversion experience and leading to

evangelism and missions. Following this tradition, the Moravian church under the leadership of Count Zinzendorf (1700-1760) was zealous in taking the Gospel to the lost all over the world. In many ways, modern missions is a direct outcome of this movement.

### C. The Evangelical Awakening

The revival led by John Wesley (1703-1791) and George Whitefield (1714-1770) in England resulted not only in the spread of the Gospel, but in social change that may have averted a British revolution like the one in France. Wesley, who was converted through the witness of the Moravians, was a powerful preacher and a strategic organizer. During his 40 years of ministry, he traveled 550,000 km on horseback. He preached 42,000 sermons and wrote 200 books. At the height of the movement, some 100,000 people in England were gathering in 10,000 groups that Wesley had started. The revival spilled over into America, led by Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) and Francis Asbury (1745-1816), and resulted in Wesleyan, Congregational and Methodist churches.

### D. William Carey

A young Baptist man from England named William Carey (1761-1834) is often called the “father of modern missions.” At that time the prevailing opinion was that God would fulfill the Great Commission by His own means without the help of believers. Inspired by the Moravians, Carey pleaded his case until his association of churches reluctantly established a mission board and sent him to India, where he served for forty years.

### E. “The Great Century”

The 1800’s were a time of incredible growth and expansion for believers. The Moravian idea modeled by William Carey caught on. Adoniram Judson (1788-1850) became a missionary to Burma, David Livingstone (1813-1873) served in Africa, and Hudson Taylor (1832-1905) went to China. These and others were pioneers. They endured persecution and harsh living conditions as they proclaimed the Gospel, established churches, and translated the Scriptures while also establishing schools and hospitals.

### F. Lessons Learned

By the end of this era a Christian presence was established in nearly every country of the world. However, in many places, Christianity and European culture were blended. All too often, the outcome of this mixture was questionable conversions and weak churches. Likewise, there was great resentment among the leaders of emerging churches and nations because of the politicization of the faith. Christianity is not equal to any earthly culture, but should transform all cultures. Missionaries should focus on transformation rather than importing the culture of their sending country.

The bright spot in this era was the influence of the Moravians. Their emphasis on genuine Christian lifestyle and the importance of personal salvation moved them to reach out to the lost both near and far. Almost every advance in missions during the Colonial Era was a direct or indirect result of the influence and example of the Moravians. God can use a single group of faithful believers to make a huge difference in fulfilling the Great Commission.

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## IV. THE MODERN ERA: AD 1900-PRESENT

In the current era, the nature of missions has changed in several ways. Whereas the Colonial Era created a Christianity that seemed to carry European culture and politics to other countries, modern Christianity has become more focused on people groups and social justice. This change has been subtle, but steady.

## A. Internationalization

As colonialism died, new countries emerged, the mission field matured and missionaries became guests in the countries in which they served. During the 1950s the number of Christians in the United States and Europe was surpassed by the growing number of Christians in the rest of the world. Nationals became the leaders of the churches and foreign missionaries began to take on supportive roles. In many cases, this shift was a result of the spiritual maturity of the national churches. But occasionally it was simply a reaction to colonialism—in essence, a power struggle between missionary and national.

The positive blessing from internationalization is that many “mission fields” have become missionary sending centers. As the church in the southern hemisphere has surpassed the north as the center of worldwide Christianity, countries like South Korea, Brazil, Nigeria, and others are sending out thousands of missionaries to unreached peoples.

## B. New Strategies

Leaders like Donald McGavran (1897-1990) were some of the first to apply cultural anthropology and other social sciences to the missionary task. McGavran suggested that the culture of a given group of people should be researched and understood by missionaries and that the Gospel should then be “contextualized” and preached in a way that takes into consideration the unique culture of the audience. Missiologists (experts concerning missions) like Paul Hiebert (1932-2007) and Ralph Winter (1924-present) took McGavran’s ideas into consideration and began to call for and lead very creative, strategic efforts to spread the Gospel in culturally-appropriate ways.

## C. Hidden Peoples

Instead of viewing the world geopolitically, McGavran’s insights led believers to look at the missionary task via what has become known as the people group principle. It became clear that the Gospel travels naturally among people of the same culture and that people from the same country are not always of the same culture.

Today, missiologists estimate that there are some 16,150 people groups in the world, each of which is ethnically, linguistically or culturally distinct enough to require their own evangelistic effort. Of these, perhaps 6,900 are still considered “unreached” (have no Gospel witness).

There are some 16,150 people groups in the world, each of which is ethnically, linguistically or culturally distinct enough to require their own evangelistic effort.

Missionaries like Cameron Townsend (1896-1982) began ministries to translate the Scriptures into the languages of every people group in the world. More recently, groups like Joshua Project have begun to catalogue these groups and mobilize laborers to reach each one. The goal is to establish believing fellowships among “*every tribe and language and people and nation*” (Rev 5:9).

## D. Social Justice

One of the most pressing questions for missions today is how social justice fits into the Gospel message and the Great Commission. The Reformers emphasized personal spiritual conversion and the Pietists added a focus on personal holy living. Unfortunately, these Christian ideas were often drowned out by the cultural influences of colonialism, resulting in a “gospel” that was often little more than conversion to a European lifestyle and values.

Perhaps one of the major weaknesses of the Reformers, and to a lesser degree of the Pietists, was neglecting to emphasize the importance of Christian community and of the role of the believer in society. Today, as the center of the church has shifted into areas that are often more communal and less wealthy than the West, the biblical responsibility for “one another” has moved closer to the forefront of Christianity, and of missions. There is much emphasis on being “salt and light” and on social justice. This is, of course, a good thing.

One of the biggest dangers to authentic Christianity has always been a lack of balance. Christianity's compassion for suffering people partially intersects with two secular ideologies. Liberation theology also wants to free the oppressed, but rationalizes doing so through violence, and is often a front for atheistic communism. Likewise, Western ideals of democracy often mean capitalism—which can promote greed and materialism. The Gospel should never be confused with either of these political ideologies. Believers must not forget the foundational truths of Christianity, even in the pursuit of “good” things.

One of the biggest dangers to authentic Christianity has always been a lack of balance.

### E. Lessons Learned

In this modern era we learn that there is more than one way to do missions. There are multitudes of people doing a variety of tasks in the effort to establish churches among every people group. But as things have become more sophisticated and the social sciences so prominent, we risk falling into the trap of thinking that missions is the result of human effort. The truth is that modern efforts are doomed to failure unless God is at the center of our plans. This has always been, and always will be, true.

This leaves the modern Church with the responsibility to sift through contemporary culture to find the things that are good, while rejecting the things that are contrary to Scripture. The priority of the Gospel of salvation and our growth into the likeness of Christ can never be compromised for the values of contemporary culture—the Gospel must transform culture. The culture surrounding every generation of Christians is different. Every one must figure out how to lead authentic Christian lives and to preach the true Gospel in a way that is relevant to their world, but not conformed to it. This challenge is not new—it has been faced by the church in every historical era. If we are wise, we will learn from both their successes and failures.

## CONCLUSION

History is not a series of random events. Rather, history is a stage on which we see God at work to redeem people from every tribe and nation. Through “ups and downs,” failures and successes, God uses imperfect people and unlikely circumstances in unexpected ways to spread the Gospel. All history should be viewed in light of this unseen reality, teaching us several important principles:

- Jesus said, “I will build my Church,” and He is doing it!
- God’s ways are not our ways—He may not work the way we expect.
- The Great Commission is not done yet—we need to press on with the task.
- There is no one way to do missions—every era is different.

## QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION, REVIEW AND APPLICATION

- Describe some of the pivotal events in missions history.
- What is your favorite era in church history? Why is it your favorite?
- How has missions changed during these four eras?
- What lessons can we learn from church history?
- What is wrong with linking Christianity to one particular culture?

## ACTION PLAN

How has the Gospel come to your region? Interview those who might know more about this than you do and write a small report. What kind of insights does your local church history give you into the present task? Include this in your report.

How many unreached people groups still exist in your country? (Joshua Project [www.joshuaproject.net](http://www.joshuaproject.net) may help you find the answer to this.) What can you say about the missionary task that still remains in your country? Include this in your report as well.

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# **PART 2:**

# **UNDERSTANDING CULTURE**

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DELTA COURSE

6

LESSON

# What Is Worldview? [4]

## FOUNDATION OF BEHAVIOR

### ☞ Lesson Purpose

The purpose of this lesson is to define worldview and show how it affects conversion and discipleship.

### ☞ Main Points

- Worldview is the set of ideas and assumptions that answers the “big” questions of origin, destiny, purpose, and the nature of the supernatural.
- Worldview affects behavior on a very deep level.
- Worldviews that do not conform to the Bible deviate from the truth.

### ☞ Desired Outcomes

When the content of this lesson has been mastered, each participant should

- Be able to define worldview.
- Be able to explain the relationship between worldview and behavior.
- Understand that lasting transformation only occurs with worldview change and that the Gospel must challenge worldview beliefs within a culture—not just behavioral practices.

## INTRODUCTION

Anyone who is involved in evangelism and discipleship knows that true life transformation does not come easily. There seems to be something deep within people that resists change. What is this “force” that fights against transformation and why is it so powerful? Throughout history, people of every culture have wrestled with the “big questions” of life.

- Where did I come from?
- Why do I exist?
- What happens when I die?
- What is right and what is wrong?
- Is there a supernatural being or force at work in the world?

These questions are universal. Ecclesiastes 3:11 says that God has “set eternity” in the hearts of men. Deep in our souls, we all know that life consists of more than the physical, visible world. In every culture, people are seeking to understand the true nature of the world. The way they answer these questions profoundly affects the way they live and act.

### I. WHAT IS WORLDVIEW?

“Worldview” is the term that is used for the answers that people give to the questions above—that is, how they understand reality and truth. Their “worldview” is the way they look at and make sense of the world. Although a worldview is a set of beliefs, not all beliefs are important enough to be called worldview. Worldview specifically concerns only the deep questions of existence and purpose. Worldview is therefore foundational to the rest of our *beliefs* and *values*.



- **Worldview** – our understanding of what exists and why.
- **Beliefs** – all of the assumptions we make about how everything else in life works in light of our worldview.
- **Values** – our views about what is right or wrong, moral or immoral, good or bad, in light of our worldview and beliefs.

Whether or not we are aware of our worldview, it nevertheless influences our priorities, behavior, and relationships. Three broad types of worldview were discussed in Spiritual Warfare lesson 1 in the Omega Course. However, church planters who are working in a cross-cultural setting will need to have a greater understanding of worldview because it so strongly influences behavior. When we minister to our own culture, we can assume that people will process and respond to spiritual truth in much the same way as we do. However, when we minister to another cultural, we should assume that there will be significant differences between our response and theirs. In our own culture, worldview is familiar and intuitively understood. In another culture, it is foreign and unfamiliar and must be diligently studied and examined.

Worldview is central to religion. In fact, most religions are simply an expression of how people understand the world and their role in it. For instance, cultures that believe demons are in control of the world develop religious practices that tell them how to appease or influence those spirits. Unfortunately, most worldviews are not accurate. Every world religion attempts to explain the world *as they perceive it*. But the only way to understand the world is to learn about it from the Scriptures—God’s authoritative revelation of why the world exists and how it functions. Because most world religions reject the Bible, they end up with a distorted view of the world. This topic will be discussed in greater detail in the next lesson.

Every world religion attempts to explain the world *as they perceive it*.

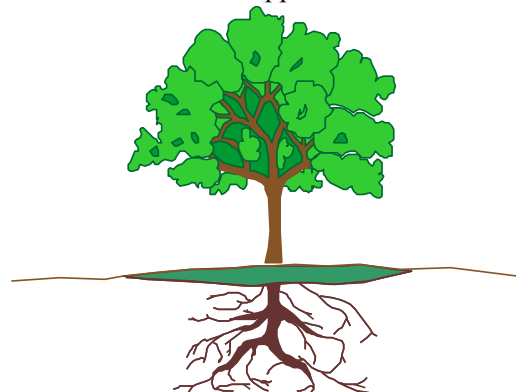
## II. WORLDVIEW AND BEHAVIOR

Behavior is the outgrowth of our worldview beliefs. Behavior includes all of the things that people in a society do or do not do, including interactions among the members of society, religious practices, holiday traditions, eating practices, etc. The behavior of a given culture may be completely in agreement with Scripture or completely opposed to it, but most often it will be a mixture. Some practices will be sinful, others holy, and still others neutral. This will depend on how closely the culture’s worldview conforms to God’s revelation.

Without question, a key goal of ministry is to bring about change in behavior to make it conform to biblical standards. Too often, however, missionaries have tried to bring behavior into conformity with the Word of God without changing the beliefs and values of the culture’s worldview. This effort, while born of noble intentions, is usually fruitless (Col 2:20-23).

Although we have said that worldview *influences* behavior, it does not *determine* it. What is the difference, and why is it important in ministry? Consider the example of a tree. When the wind blows against a tree, it bends. The harder the wind blows, the more it bends. However, when the wind stops blowing, the tree returns to its natural vertical orientation. This happens because the tree has a root system deep underground that holds it in that position. The same thing happens if a person pushes on the tree in order to bend it. You cannot see the roots, but their effect is obvious and undeniable.

Worldview functions in a similar way to the roots of a tree. Worldview is *internal* and difficult to see or understand. However, when we try to change behavior, which is *external* and visible, we often fail. When we exert pressure through preaching, counseling, exhorting, or other means, we may see some change in behavior. The tree (person) bends. However, when we relax our effort we are often



disappointed to see the former behavior return. The typical response is to preach harder (exert more effort). As with the tree, this may cause the behavior to temporarily bend, but not to change permanently.

### III. IDENTIFYING WORLDVIEW

Although worldview, like the roots of a tree, is not easily seen, there are ways to discern and understand the worldview of a culture. Worldview is the foundation for all behavior, values and customs. Therefore, we can gain clues to the shape of a culture's worldview by examining their *rituals* and *symbols*, such as burial practices, marriage customs, birth celebrations, harvest celebrations and other rites of passage. These rituals and symbols are the outward, visible expressions of how the culture understands the nature of the world.

We can gain clues to the shape of a culture's worldview by examining their *rituals* and *symbols*.

#### A. Rituals

Rituals are customary observances or practices (forms) that help to hold society together as a harmonious unit. There are many types of rituals practiced in cultures throughout the world.

- Lifecycle rituals mark distinct transitions in life, such as birth, naming, adolescence, marriage and death.
- Crisis rituals are performed during times of high anxiety, such as illness, famine, prior to going to war or natural disasters (earthquake, threat of flooding, etc.).
- Seasonal/event rituals are associated with seasonal or special events such as planting or harvesting, summer solstice, winter solstice, the launching of a vessel or dedication of a building.
- Sacred rituals are performed in divine service.

All of these ritual practices stem from worldview beliefs. Muslims pray in the direction of Mecca because they consider Mecca, the site of the birthplace of Islam, to be a holy place. Since Abraham's day, Jews have practiced the ritual of circumcision as a sign of the covenant that God gave to Abraham. Haitians carrying a body to a graveyard deceptively start down each intersecting path in the hope that evil spirits will be confused and unable to follow them to the graveyard. Hindus bathe in the Ganges River because they believe it will provide life and forgiveness. Ritual practices also include symbolic acts which express meaning of some sort, such as respect. Examples of these symbolic acts are taking shoes off to worship, bowing the head to pray, or standing up when a teacher enters the room.

Ritual practices give insight into peoples' worldviews. Usually, the more rituals in a society, the more resistant it is to change. By taking time to understand the reason for and meaning behind ritual practices, cross-cultural workers can begin to discover bridges for sharing the Gospel.

#### B. Symbols

Symbols are visible things that represent something else that is invisible. They are used to establish identity, establish categories of discrete sets (clean/unclean, beauty/ugliness, good/bad, etc.), and reinforce values. There are a variety of types of symbols. Some symbols help to establish personal identity, such as a family crest, flags, totem poles and team or company logos. Other symbols represent historic events or people, such as statues of heroes and war memorials.

A flag is a symbol of a country. The crescent or half-moon shape is often identified as a symbol for Islam. Various colors of clothing identify different groups of the Hmong people. Veterans wear medals to indicate military service or heroism. In God's eyes, perhaps the most grievous symbols are idols, which represent false gods in cultures around the world. Idols may be manmade, but may also be trees, rocks, rivers, or other physical items that represent

gods. In the same manner, many people believe that the stars and other heavenly bodies represent divine powers.


Symbols may help cross-cultural workers gain insight into worldview beliefs. They may also be bridges or barriers for the Gospel. For example, in some cultures that have been oppressed by “Christian” countries, the cross is seen as a symbol of oppression, rather than a symbol of Christ’s death and resurrection. Bible societies in these countries have taken to redesigning the Bible book covers to replace the traditional cross with another cover design, in order to keep the cross symbol from being a barrier to people’s willingness to read the Scriptures.

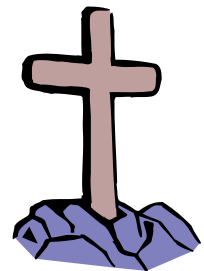
#### IV. CHRISTIAN WORLDVIEW

For Christians, the Bible is the main source of our worldview. It gives us the true answers to the “big questions.” The Bible describes God as the Creator and Sustainer of the Universe. It explains the reason for sin and death in the world (Adam and Eve’s disobedience). And it explains God’s desire to reconcile mankind to Himself, first through the call of Abraham and the covenant with him—to bless Abraham and through him and his offspring to bless all the peoples of earth; and ultimately through the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, whom the Bible reveals to be fully God and fully man, the only perfect sacrifice for sin. It also teaches us that the Holy Spirit indwells every believer, transforming them into the image of Christ.

In the formation of the early church, the apostles deemed only two sacred rituals as essential for Christians to practice—baptism and the Lord’s Supper (communion). Baptism was a ritual of transition—symbolizing the believer’s transition from a life lived apart from Christ, to a new life in Christ. Baptism is a proclamation of a believer’s participation in the death and resurrection of Christ (Ro 6:3-5). While baptism is a ritual of transition, the practice of the Lord’s Supper is a ritual of remembrance. Jesus commanded his followers to practice the Lord’s Supper (Mt 26:26-28; Mk 14:22-24; Lk 22:19-20). The Lord’s Supper is the continuing rite of the visible church and commemorates Jesus’ death and resurrection, that He is available and present now for His Church, and that He will return again one day in glory (1Co 11:26).



For most Christians, the cross is a symbol of Jesus’ death and resurrection. Early Christians used the symbol of a fish (  ) because the Greek letters which spell out “Jesus Christ God’s Son Savior” are ICHTHUS, which also means fish. The fish symbol was used when the early church was being persecuted. This was a secret sign scratched on the walls of buildings or drawn on the floor in the sand, to tell people where a Christian meeting was being held. It is still frequently used today.



#### V. CHANGING WORLDVIEW

Throughout the Bible, we see God addressing faulty worldviews. In the Old Testament, the emphasis is on the sovereignty of God over all creation. Israel consistently adopted the worldviews of the nations around them and served idols. Through the prophets, the Lord condemned the idea that any other god existed or could actually affect the lives of men. He confirmed this truth by alternately bringing material blessing or destruction on the nation depending on whether or not they served Him instead of idols.

In the Gospels, Jesus confronted the prevailing Jewish ideas that: 1) God favored Israel simply because they were the descendents of Abraham, 2) salvation depended on keeping the Law of Moses, and 3) Jesus was not equal to God. His preaching often took the form of “you have heard it said . . . but I say to you . . .” Christ definitely preached about behavior, but He based those behavioral changes on *a new understanding about the nature of God and the world*.

We see this same balance of worldview and behavior in the New Testament Epistles—especially the Pauline Epistles. The first half of each of Paul’s letters typically addresses doctrine. They

explain the true nature of the physical and spiritual world. With that foundation, the second half of each letter usually describes the way believers should behave in light of these truths.

The biblical pattern of preaching, therefore, is to first address worldview assumptions and then to demand changes in behavior to reflect the new beliefs and values. Cross-cultural church planters would be wise to follow this same order:

1. Identify and address underlying worldview beliefs.
2. Encourage lifestyle changes to conform to the new beliefs.

What might this look like in practice? Suppose a church planter is ministering in an animistic culture where the people think that the evil spirits control everything that happens to them, and that God is very far away. As a result, they feel they must consult with the witchdoctor whenever they have a problem. How might the church planter help them stop serving demons and begin to trust the Lord alone in times of trouble? Consider the following two messages:

1. **Message A:** “Don’t go to the witchdoctor. Instead, pray and go to the medical clinic.”
2. **Message B:** “Jesus is Lord of all. He has complete authority over everything including all spirits and diseases. He cares about all of our trials and has promised to answer our prayers offered in faith. He is seeking people who will refuse to serve Satan and instead trust Him to care for them.”

Can you see the difference between these two approaches? The first message focuses only on behavior, ignoring the fact that animistic cultures believe God is distant and not involved in the world. Therefore, they depend on witchdoctors to help them deal with the evil spirits who they believe cause diseases and other calamities. Only the second message addresses and attempts to change the *reason* that they go to the witchdoctor. It corrects their faulty understanding of God’s role in the world.

Throughout the history of Christianity, missionaries entering a new culture struggled with the temptation to preach against “sinful” behavior patterns rather than take the time to learn about and then challenge worldview assumptions. Sermons abound on the evils of smoking, drinking, bathing habits, dietary practices and child-rearing techniques. In 19th century Africa, for example, many missionaries focused on clothing and educating the “heathens,” and on changing marital practices, as a means of bringing them the Gospel. This behavior transformation without worldview transformation acted as a veneer, cloaking animistic/pagan rituals in the garb of “Christian behavior,” resulting in syncretism.

The task of the church planter, therefore, is to correct sinful *worldview* in order to change *behavior*. Mindset, symbols, rituals and other behavior offer clues to the underlying beliefs of the culture. As we observe the people, we should be continually asking questions like these:

- Why do they do that action?
- What does that symbol/ritual mean to them? Why is it important to them?
- What does this tell me about their understanding of God’s power, presence, nature, etc.?
- Do they think God hears them when they pray?
- Do they think God sees what they do?
- Do they think God cares about them?
- Do they think Satan exists? If so, how much power do they think he has?
- Do they think the future is fixed, or yet to be determined?
- How do they think the world was created? How did it arrive in its present condition?
- What do they think is the next thing that happens after death?

- What do they think is virtuous, and why?
- What do they think is immoral, and why?
- How do they decide whether something is true or not?
- What literature/texts are important to them and why?
- What do they worry about and why?
- What do they desire from life and why?
- If they could accomplish anything in life, what would it be and why?

## CONCLUSION

By understanding that behavior is deeply influenced by worldview beliefs, missionaries can become effective agents of change within cultures. The transforming work of the Gospel must change both belief and behavior. The first task of missionaries entering a new culture is to learn some of the behavioral practices of that culture and develop relationships of trust with the people. Then, as these relationships of trust develop, the missionaries will be able to share the Gospel, which challenges the existing worldview. As people receive this new information and are receptive to it, their new worldview will cause them to rethink and refashion some of their existing social relationships. The Gospel will become a catalyst for new behavior patterns among believers in the social environment. As relationships among individuals and groups are transformed, the original cultural system will not disappear, but will be reinterpreted and reinvented in terms of the Gospel message.

As new churches are formed, the old worldview beliefs of the culture may cause social pressure against the new believers, creating tension and forcing Christians to make hard decisions about how to live according to their new faith. Churches everywhere are constantly struggling to be salt and light in the world, not conforming to its value systems, but presenting a new value system—that of the Gospel of Christ. Church planters must be aware of this struggle and guide new believers through the change from an old worldview to a new, biblical one.

In order to live transformed lives within their society, believers must have a commitment to the written Word of God and be involved in the local church. The pressures of the old cultural system and social environment constantly work against the liberating power of the Gospel. Regular exposure to the Word of God enables believers to maintain their new worldview and to continually renew their minds with the ideas of the Gospel (Ro 12:1) rather than fall back into old patterns of behavior. Involvement in a local church allows believers to experience transformed relationships, to use their spiritual gifts in service to God and to be encouraged through the preaching and teaching of the Word of God and prayer in order to live transformed lives in the society around them.

## QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION, REVIEW AND APPLICATION

- List some symbols that are common in your own culture. What do these symbols mean? What clues do they give about your culture's worldview assumptions?
- What are some rituals that are practiced in your culture? What do they mean? What clues do they give about your culture's worldview assumptions?
- In the Gospels, what are some of the ways in which Jesus challenged the prevailing social structure of his time? How did he live a transformed life within that structure?
- Select one of the Pauline Epistles and make an outline, showing the worldview/doctrinal discussion and the resulting behavioral exhortations. Do you think this is a useful format for preaching sermons? Why or why not?

**ACTION PLAN**

- Make a list of your worldview assumptions and that of your own culture. Then, go out among the people of your target culture. Identify some of the symbols used and rituals practiced. What do they teach you about the worldview of the target people? Interview people about their beliefs. Write a short 1-2 page paper on what you have learned so far about the worldview assumptions of the people among whom you are working.
- Which of these assumptions will the Gospel challenge? What parts of Scripture do you think will be most useful in beginning to share the Gospel with these people?

**SOURCES**

- Lingenfelter, Sherwood G. *Transforming Culture: A Challenge for Christian Mission*. Baker Book House Company, 1992.

DELTA COURSE

7

LESSON

# A World without God [2]

## WORLDVIEWS THAT REJECT A PERSONAL GOD

### ☞ Lesson Purpose

The purpose of this lesson is to summarize the major worldviews that do not believe in a personal God, examine the way they respond to the “big questions” of life, and to suggest appropriate ways that church planters can begin to dialog with them concerning Christianity.

### ☞ Main Points

- Naturalists do not believe that God exists. They attribute everything we see and feel to natural processes.
- Monists, also called pantheists, believe that the physical universe is an illusion. The only reality is one impersonal spiritual force.
- Dualists do not believe that there is a personal God who participates in the world, but that everything is controlled by opposing impersonal forces of good and evil, Yin and Yang, or harmony and chaos.

### ☞ Desired Outcomes

When the content of this lesson has been mastered, each participant should

- Explain how each of these major worldviews answers the big worldview questions.
- Understand how each of these worldviews would respond to a real-life illness.
- Be able to identify a weakness of each worldview that would provide opportunities to discuss how Christianity addresses the real needs and questions of life.

## INTRODUCTION

In the previous lesson, we examined how the answers to the big “worldview” questions are foundational to all other beliefs. It is unlikely that substantial lifestyle change can happen without corresponding changes to worldview. Since worldview is foundational to belief, worldviews shape the religious beliefs of a culture.

Therefore, understanding the religion of a culture gives important clues to their worldview. In this lesson and the next we will look at several common religions and examine how they relate to worldview and how they affect evangelism and discipleship.

Understanding the religion of a culture gives important clues to their worldview.

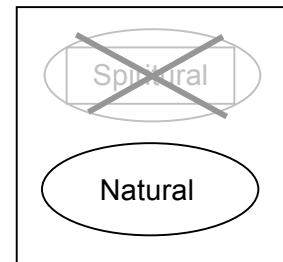
It is helpful from a Christian perspective to divide the major world religions into two groups depending on whether or not they believe that a personal God is responsible for our existence. When evangelizing someone who already believes there is a personal God, our task is to proclaim the true nature of that God and to explain how they can have a personal relationship with Him through Christ. But if someone believes that God does not exist or is only an impersonal force, our approach should be significantly different. We will need to begin with the more basic discussion of the existence of God before we can describe Him.

This lesson will present the four major groups of religions that reject the existence or personal nature of God—*naturalism*, *monism/pantheism* and *dualism*. This is admittedly a simplistic presentation of very complex religions, but it helps us to understand how each of them is influenced by their underlying worldview beliefs.

## I. NATURALISM

The first category is also sometimes called atheism. The core belief of the religions in this group is that there is no god or supernatural power. The naturalist worldview is demonstrated by Figure 7.1. Naturalists believe that the spiritual does not exist. There are only natural forces and we are the result of the chance combination of basic elements of matter and energy. Therefore, we do not have any responsibility to a higher power or moral law.

Figure 7.1 Naturalism



Naturalists exalt the role of science rather than God. In the modern world, they often believe firmly in evolution—not just as small evolutionary changes that are widely supported, but as the source of all existing forms of life. They hold to this wider view of evolution with an almost religious faith despite the absence of any significant evidence, and against established scientific principles that say the universe should decay—not become more complex. Likewise, naturalists deny the existence of miracles or any supernatural phenomena.

### A. Secular Humanism

Secular humanism is the most common, generic form of naturalism. The only moral code that they recognize derives from their understanding of human need. As a result, they may be concerned about their fellow man or they may be entirely focused on their own selfish desires. If secular humanists get sick, they always attribute it to germs and consider scientific medicine to be the only answer. Any event, positive or negative, has a natural, physical cause.

Secular humanists address the worldview questions in the following order and with the following answers:

- Is there a supernatural force at work in the world? – “No.”
- Where did I come from? – “I am the result of natural, random processes.”
- Why do I exist? – “I am the result of chance.”
- What happens when I die? – “I cease to exist and my body decays into basic elements.”
- What is right and what is wrong? – “I decide what is right and wrong.”

When presenting the Gospel to secular humanists, it is usually necessary to begin with the nature of man. Although they believe humans “happened,” they innately want to believe that there is something special about mankind—or at least about themselves. Christians have a clear reason for this belief—we are all created in the image of God (Ge 1:27). Secular humanists have no basis for what they instinctively know to be true—humans are better than animals. They want to say that people have “rights,” but their atheistic worldview cannot explain the source of these rights. How do we have any rights if we are only the result of chance? This conflict between what they “believe” and what they “feel” demonstrates that their worldview is inadequate, and can be the key to helping them see that it is wrong.

This conflict between what they “believe” and what they “feel” demonstrates that their worldview is inadequate.

### B. Communism

Communism is essentially a collective form of humanism in that it subjugates the rights and needs of the individual to those of the collective group. As an economic system, many people find communism an attractive alternative to the often hedonistic, selfish individualism of capitalism. Communism attempts to structure a moral code from the needs of the masses, believing that if society is structured around these collective humanistic morals, better people will result. If the environment is improved, the people will be too. If a communist is sick, it is caused by germs and the answer is to develop a better system of health care for the masses.



They address the worldview questions in the following way:

- Is there a supernatural force at work in the world? – “*No.*”
- Where did I come from? – “*I am the result of natural, random processes.*”
- Why do I exist? – “*I am the result of chance.*”
- What happens when I die? – “*I cease to exist and my body decays into basic elements.*”
- What is right and what is wrong? – “*The values of the group determine what is right or wrong.*”

Although Christians might like communism’s emphasis on the group instead of the individual, we cannot accept the atheistic foundation. When confronting communism, however, it is usually helpful to focus on the nature of man rather than of God—this is a better starting point for dialog since communists not only believe man exists, but that man is the focus of life. The blatant weakness of a communist worldview is that communism does not lead to better people. Invariably, communism leads to autocratic, repressive governments and a weak view of human rights. This has been repeated so often in so many different countries that they know it to be true even if they do not want to admit it.

Scripture teaches that mankind is inherently evil as a result of the Fall (Ro 5:12, 19). The answer to sin is salvation through Christ and allowing Him to change us from the inside out (Ro 12:1-2). Communist attempts to change society first have not generally resulted in better individuals. Rather, it typically leads to insensitive, uncaring governments and causes sloth and deception among the governed. This is true even though communism sometimes achieves goals of improved education, housing, medical care, etc. The basic problem with a communist worldview is that it does not fix the sinful, selfish nature of people. If one mushroom is poisonous, a bagful of them cannot somehow be healthy.

## II. MONISM/PANTHEISM

In many ways, monism, also known as pantheism, is the opposite of naturalism. Whereas naturalism believes that only the physical universe exists, monists believe that the physical is only an illusion. Monists only accept the existence of one impersonal, spiritual reality, as illustrated by Figure 7.2. The two main monistic religions are Hinduism and Buddhism. They share many beliefs in common, but differ on purpose of life and the nature of the individual.

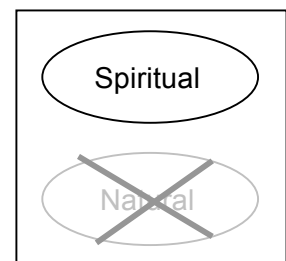
### A. Hinduism

Most forms of Hinduism agree that the one spiritual reality is called Brahman. Everything is really a part of Brahman, which is an impersonal oneness. The goal of all Hindus is to attain a state of enlightenment where they lose their personal identity and become one with Brahman. Until this happens, they are subject to the Law of Karma, which states that every person will be rewarded or punished in direct correlation to the good or bad they do. Their current circumstances of life are the result of past lives, and the only hope is for a better situation in a future reincarnation. If a Hindu is sick, it is punishment for mistakes in a past life, and there is nothing they can do about it.

Hindus address the worldview questions in the following way:

- Is there a supernatural force at work in the world? – “*There is indeed a force, but there is no world.*”
- Where did I come from? – “*I am part of Brahman, the one spiritual reality, and always have been.*”

**Figure 7.2**  
**Monism/Pantheism**



- Why do I exist? – *“I am reaping what I sowed in a past life according to Karma.”*
- What happens when I die? – *“I will be reincarnated to start another cycle of Karma.”*
- What is right and what is wrong? – *“I must submit to my situation and work toward enlightenment so that I can finally escape my individual personhood and return to impersonal oneness with Brahman.”*

Hinduism thrives among poor, suffering people because it helps them cope with life in two ways, 1) it gives them hope that their next life might be better and 2) it helps them accept their current powerless state as something that cannot be changed. Essentially, the basic beliefs of Hinduism rationalize why adherence to Hinduism does not seem to improve or change one’s life. Hinduism does not promise any results until the next reincarnation. One of the unfounded critiques of Christianity is that it is a “pie in the sky” religion.

That is, if we believe in Jesus now, we will receive our reward when we get to heaven (“the sky.”) Hinduism takes this concept of delayed gratification to extreme.

Hinduism takes the concept of delayed gratification to extreme.

There are at least two good starting points for discussing Christianity with Hindus. The first is “why do I exist?” In Hinduism, my uniqueness is a problem which I hope to eventually overcome in order to again be a part of the impersonal oneness of Brahman. By contrast, in Christianity I am a unique creation of a loving, personal God who created me for a purpose (Eph 2:10). The second issue concerns our current options in life. In Hinduism, I am trapped by Karma according to actions in a previous life. I am powerless to do anything to change my situation and must submit to my punishment for past misdeeds. There is no negotiation, grace or forgiveness. In Christianity, however, a loving Savior offers us forgiveness based on His sacrifice in spite of our sin. By grace, He gives us blessing that we do not deserve, as well as eternal life with Him in glory (Eph 2:8-9). Hinduism has no such path to joy in this life, nor a similar glorious outcome. Instead, the cycles of reincarnations and Karma continue until we are able by our own efforts to finally escape from our personal state.

## B. Buddhism

Like Hinduism, Buddhism is most prevalent in cultures where suffering is common since it was developed by a Hindu who was trying to find out what to do about suffering. The answer that he arrived at was the four “Noble Truths.”

1. First Noble Truth – life consists of suffering.
2. Second Noble Truth – we suffer because of our desires.
3. Third Noble Truth – we can eliminate suffering by eliminating desire.
4. Fourth Noble Truth – desire can be eliminated by following Buddhism’s Eight-Fold Path to Nirvana.

Buddhists address the worldview questions in the following way:

- Is there a supernatural force at work in the world? – *“Nothing exists, everything is an illusion.”*
- Where did I come from? – *“I am an illusion.”*
- Why do I exist? – *“I don’t exist.”*
- What happens when I die? – *“I will cease to exist (although I never did exist!).”*
- What is right and what is wrong? – *“Following the strict moral code described by the Eight-Fold Path is the only way to escape from the suffering of life and cease to exist.”*

Buddhism might be thought of as a pessimistic version of Hinduism—Nirvana is not a happy place, but rather, extinction! If adherents faithfully follow the Eight-Fold Path, which consists of good, moral living, the only reward is that suffering stops because they cease to exist. This, however, is not a problem because nothing really exists anyway—everything is an illusion! If a Buddhist gets sick, it is normal suffering that is part of life, and he should focus on the fact that sickness does not really exist.

God has created man to be with Him for eternity (Rev 21:3-4). Although sin has affected all mankind, we still retain some important qualities that draw us toward God—a desire for relationships and a longing for hope. Every person has these attributes, including Buddhists. Buddhism rejects our longing for relationship and hope that things will be better—it says these desires are wrong. Buddhism encourages us to do good things for other people, while condemning any desire for the relationships that result from these actions. Christianity tells us how these legitimate desires can be met in Christ and through Christian community. We serve God and others because we love them. The Christian worldview fulfills the God-given longings of the heart and promises to do so for eternity.

The Christian worldview fulfills the God-given longings of the heart and promises to do so for eternity.

Buddhism promotes doing good to others as the way to escape suffering, but does not have a logical answer as to why this is so. If all that exists is illusion, there is no personal God to provide a moral code, and we are headed for extinction, what is the origin of this code? Why is it good? Christians know that God has created all mankind with a conscience that tells us some things are right and others are wrong (Ro 2:15). Buddhism bases morality on this feeling of right and wrong, but does so while rejecting the only explanation as to why our conscience exists. Without a personal God, Buddhists have no basis to declare anything “good” or “evil.”

### III. DUALISM

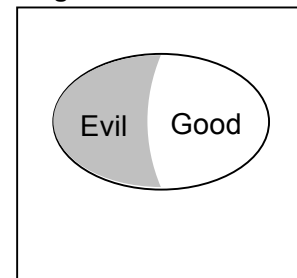
Dualistic religions include Taoism and Zoroastrianism, which believe that if a personal God exists, he is far away and not involved in earthly life. Rather, all events are controlled by two opposing forces (Fig. 7.3) that might be called “good and evil,” “Yin and Yang,” or “harmony and chaos.” Mankind must find a way to live in balance with these forces. When a dualist gets sick, they assume that their past actions have disrupted the balance of these forces and that they must endure the illness until harmony can be restored.

Dualists address the worldview questions in the following way:

- Is there a supernatural force at work in the world? – *“Yes, two opposing, impersonal ones.”*
- Where did I come from? – *“The only important thing is that I am here.”*
- Why do I exist? – *“To live in harmony with nature.”*
- What happens when I die? – *“Death is just the balancing force to life.”*
- What is right and what is wrong? – *“Harmony and balance are good.”*

Dualists are very concerned with the *past*, which caused the current harmony or discord. In their worldview, once they have done something wrong, it is too late to correct it and the consequences must be endured. This is hardly comforting since we know that everyone sins and makes mistakes. Christianity also believes wrong actions have consequences, but includes the concepts of forgiveness and grace—sin can be forgiven and suffering averted (1Jo 1:9).

Figure 7.3 Dualism



When Dualists deal with the *present*, they are trying to avoid unbalance that will lead to problems in the future. People should seek to live in harmony with everyone else and with nature. Compromise is an important virtue. The wise person is not concerned with right and wrong, but with living in tension between the two extremes of equal power and value. While Christianity also values harmony, it never does so at the expense of right. God is completely holy and Satan is completely bad, but they are not equal (1Pe 1:15; Jn 8:44; Rev 20:2). We do not seek a position of compromise between them, but rather fully resist Satan and obey God, Who is all-powerful (Ja 4:7). Our consciences confirm that some things are just right or wrong, and should not be “balanced.” The Scriptures give clear guidelines as to what is sinful and what is holy. By contrast, dualists have no standard to know if they have done enough to achieve harmony, or to help them take a stand on any issue.

Perhaps the biggest problem for dualists is that they avoid, rather than answer, the big worldview question of what happens in the *future* when we die. As we have seen, there is a basic longing in all people for an answer to this issue. The Bible says God “set eternity” in our hearts (Ec 3:11). We are created as spiritual as well as physical beings and there is something deeply unsatisfying in being told that this life is all there is. Christianity both answers the longing for eternity and explains what it will be like (Rev 21-22). Dualism has nothing of value to offer on the topic.

## CONCLUSION

This lesson has simplified several very complex worldviews in order to give cross-cultural church planters a basic, beginning understanding of how other cultures do not approach life with the same foundational assumptions. These worldviews, in summary are

- Naturalism – there is no God
- Monism – God is only an impersonal force
- Dualism – God has abandoned the world to a struggle between impersonal forces of good and evil

Not only are there many different variations of each of these worldviews, but since people typically mix together different elements and beliefs from their culture, they usually believe some kind of “folk” worldview rather than any of the “pure” examples presented. It is imperative that church planters use the categories of this lesson only as a starting point for their own investigation into how the people to whom they minister view the basic questions of life.

For the church planter, culture study should not be an academic exercise. Rather, the purpose is to identify areas where the worldview of the people does not really answer the “big questions” to their satisfaction. Essentially, they often “feel” like there is something missing or wrong. God created mankind in His image to be with Him in fellowship for eternity. Sin causes evil and suffering in the world, but we can be delivered from this fallen state through the grace and forgiveness that is found in Christ. When we cause people to think about how their worldview compares to the answers of a Christian worldview, we influence the root level of their beliefs.

## QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION, REVIEW AND APPLICATION

- Which one of these worldviews, if any, best describe the local culture where you minister? If none apply, there may be a more appropriate view in the next lesson.
- What religions, cultures or worldviews might be mixed together in your ministry culture as a result of historical situations?
- When you are sick, what do you think is the cause, and how can you be healed?
- Have any of these worldviews influenced your own culture? Which ones? How?
- Can you identify a positive attribute in each of these worldviews? Humility demands that we not reject all parts of another culture outright, but only those parts that are unbiblical.

## ACTION PLAN

- Adapt the generalized worldview answers of this lesson to more accurately apply to the culture in which you minister. Write down the “big questions” and the suggested answer and show them to a number of people from the culture. Ask them whether the answers reflect their own beliefs, or how you might change the answers to better understand their view. Continue to ask different people until you have answers that they agree with. Compare their actual beliefs to your Christian understanding and identify the topics where Christianity seems to have obvious benefit to the culture and use these subjects as a basis for your evangelistic discussions.

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DELTA COURSE

8

LESSON

# God in the World [3]

## WORLDVIEWS THAT ACKNOWLEDGE GOD

### ☛ Lesson Purpose

The purpose of this lesson is to provide an overview of the major worldviews that believe in a personal God or gods and to compare them to the Christian worldview.

### ☛ Main Points

- Animism, also called spiritism or polytheism, exists in a myriad of forms around the world. Although animists acknowledge one or more personal gods, they minimize their influence in the world. Instead, they focus on shamans as the mediators between man and the powerful spirits around us.
- Deism is the belief that a personal God created the world, but then abandoned it to natural processes. Deists believe in God, but that faith makes little change in how they live.
- Theism comprises three major religions that have roots in the Old Testament—Judaism, Islam and Christianity. They believe in a personal God, but do not agree about His nature, His form of revelation, or His mediator.

### ☛ Desired Outcomes

When the content of this lesson has been mastered, each participant should

- Know key weaknesses in each of the non-Christian worldviews.
- Understand that the nature of God is the most foundational worldview topic.

## INTRODUCTION

The worldviews in this lesson, in contrast to those in the previous lesson, do believe in a personal God or gods. Even among this group, however, there is a wide divergence of opinion about the nature of God and the relationship of other spiritual beings to God.

The worldviews in this section are divided into three categories—*animists, deists and theists*. Christianity is one of the *theistic* worldviews. In this lesson, Christianity will be examined last and compared to the other worldviews.

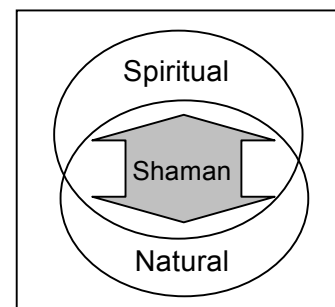
### I. ANIMISM/SPIRITISM/POLYTHEISM

*Animism*, also called *spiritism* or *polytheism*, acknowledges the spiritual world as well as the natural world. In fact, the key distinction of animism is a view that the supernatural is *very involved* in our daily life—many animists would say that the supernatural completely controls the physical world. Furthermore, shamans facilitate communication between the two worlds. Figure 8.1 illustrates this intermingling.

Animists address the worldview questions in the following way:

- Is there a supernatural force at work in the world? – “Yes, many of them.”
- Where did I come from? – “The spiritual powers allowed me to be born to my parents.”

**Figure 8.1**  
**Animistic Worldview**



- Why do I exist? – “*I am here to serve the spirits.*”
- What happens when I die? – “*I will enter the spirit world and be judged according to how I have lived.*”
- What is right and what is wrong? – “*Serving the spirits is the most important thing.*”

## A. Animistic Beliefs

There are many, many varieties of animism, typically differentiated by how many gods they believe exist and to what degree these gods influence other supernatural beings. In order to understand any animistic worldview, it is necessary to identify what they mean when they refer to *God, gods, Satan* and *spirits*.

In order to understand any animistic worldview, it is necessary to identify what they mean when they refer to *God, gods, Satan* and *spirits*.

### 1. Supreme God

Some animists believe in a supreme, personal *God*. However, they typically believe that although He is the Creator, the world is currently controlled by other lower, but still powerful, spirit beings. In other words, it does not make much practical difference to us that God exists since He is removed from our lives. The pressing issue for us is how to live in harmony with the other spirit beings. When we die, we can worry about God, but right now, He is irrelevant.

### 2. God and Satan

Animists in this category also believe in a Creator God, but believe Satan to be His equal in power. This belief in opposing good and evil powers is similar to Dualism, but with the important difference that they believe that God and Satan are personal beings. In this worldview, God is relevant to our life, but Satan is at least as important. In fact, many animists believe that Satan is *more involved* in the world than God, and therefore appeasing Satan is a more pressing issue than serving God.

### 3. God and “gods”

Another group of animists believe there is not just one God, but many. These animists particularly deserve to be called “*polytheists*” (“*poly*” means “*many*”). Some polytheists believe all the gods are essentially equal in power while others believe that there are different levels of gods. To further complicate things, the gods typically have varying interest in human affairs and their personalities range from evil to good, and everything in between. As a result, animists often focus on dealing with the lower-level gods because they are thought to be more accessible and more easily influenced.

### 4. God and the Spirits

Most animists believe that the natural world is deeply influenced by supernatural spirit beings—both evil and good. Some believe these spirits to be dead people and others think they are a separate class of being. All believe that they are personal beings. These spirits may roam the earth or they may inhabit physical things such as trees, rocks, bodies of water, animals and even people. One way or another, animists assume the spirits surround us and influence much of our lives.

In most animistic religions, the nature and interaction of the various gods and spirits is so complex that the average person could not hope to understand it. Instead, people must depend on *shamans* or “witch doctors” to guide them through the trials of life and to tell them how to interact with whatever spiritual being or beings are affecting them at a particular time. When animists get sick, they go to the shaman to find out how to appease the spirit that is causing the illness.

People depend on *shamans* or “witch doctors” to guide them through the trials of life and to tell them how to interact with whatever spiritual being or beings are affecting them.

## B. Ministering to Animists

The fact that animists are so aware of supernatural forces is both a help and a hindrance in ministering to them. They are usually very receptive to talking about spiritual issues since the spirit world plays such an important role in their daily lives. They both know and feel that there is a God. In some ways, animists are the easiest group among which to plant a church. In fact, most of the stories of mass conversions and rapid church growth occur among animistic people.

The real challenge in church planting among animists is not to convince them that God exists, but to demonstrate that the God revealed in Scripture is superior to every other spirit being and deeply involved in the world.

Animists easily *add* God to the list of spiritual beings they worship, but they do not easily *replace* their idolatry with the One True God. Therefore, *syncretism*, the mixing of religions, is the major stumbling block to the Gospel among animists. They often add elements of a new religion to their former beliefs, resulting in a new “folk religion.”

*Syncretism*, the mixing of religions, is the major stumbling block to the Gospel among animists.

In church planting, syncretism results in “converts” who willingly follow Christian practices until they have a problem, an illness or some other crisis. Since animists focus on whichever spirit being is relevant to their lives at any given time, believers from animistic backgrounds tend to do the same. They temporarily abandon Christianity until they can deal with the problem through their pagan methods. Haitians call this a “*ti kampe*,” that is, “a little pause” in their Christian life. They are convinced that God is loving and gracious and will forgive them for backsliding. They are more afraid of Satan and the demons than of the Lord.

Other believers from animistic backgrounds believe that God is not really involved in this world. They hope that perhaps He will not notice that they occasionally serve demons, or that He will at least understand that it was necessary for their survival. This group needs to understand two things. First, God is a jealous God and condemns the worship of any other being (Ex 20:3-6). He is not pleased to be included alongside other deities—He must be Lord of all. He is the one we should fear (Mt 10:28). Second, God is always present with every believer—we are His temple (Mt 28:20; 1Co 6:19). He cares about how we live and He will judge us for our actions (2Co 5:10). Teaching about the nature of God should be a priority of every church planter in cross-cultural situations—especially among animists.

Worldviews seldom match textbook descriptions. Most cultures believe in folk religions that mix one of the major worldviews with assorted local beliefs which are usually animistic. This is not surprising since modern scientific worldviews are of recent origin compared to the spiritual beliefs which have held sway for thousands of years. Church planters in any culture can expect to deal with some animism either overtly or in the form of superstition.

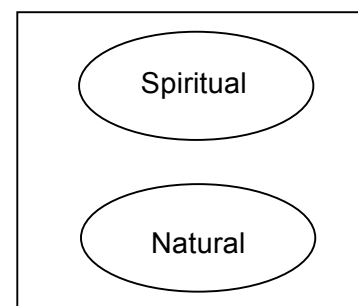
## II. DEISM

Deists share some naturalist beliefs, but also acknowledge the existence of a personal God. They believe that God created the universe but then abandoned it to natural processes. As a result, they live their lives on the basis of modern scientific principles and rationalism. However, they avoid the major weakness of naturalism by saying that people have intrinsic value because they were created by God. Figure 8.2 shows the two worlds and the gap between them.

Deists address the worldview questions in the following way:

- Is there a supernatural force at work in the world? – “*God exists, but is no longer involved in the world.*”

**Figure 8.2**  
**Deistic Worldview**





- Where did I come from? – *“Mankind was created by God.”*
- Why do I exist? – *“I exist to be a positive influence in society.”*
- What happens when I die? – *“My soul may still exist in some form and might be rewarded for the way I have lived.”*
- What is right and what is wrong? – *“We should discover by reason what would cause the happiness of all men.”*

Deism as a formal worldview is not especially popular today. In reality, though, most of the people that we would label as “nominal Christians” hold to the principles of deism, whether they know it or not. That is, they acknowledge the existence of God, but live as though He is not involved in their daily lives. Their lifestyles are not significantly different from those of unbelievers. They hold a vague belief that there might be an afterlife and judgment but they lack enough conviction to alter the way they live. They are more concerned about being “good” in the eyes of society than in being “holy” in the eyes of God. If they get sick, they may pray to God for help, but their true faith is in medical technology.

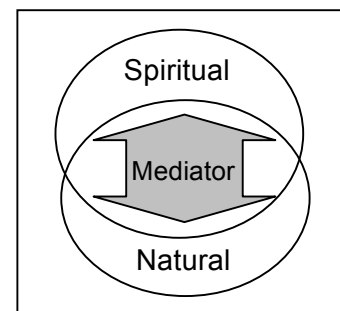
In reality, most of the people that we would label as “nominal Christians” hold to the principles of deism, whether they know it or not.

Church planters working among people with deistic worldviews must focus on the purpose of life—to bring glory to God (1Co 10:31). One of the best ways to explain this is to examine the life of Christ. Not only did He seek to glorify the Father, but He did so by becoming human and entering into our world (Jn 17:4; Php 2:5-11). It is impossible to truly understand the life of Christ and to hold to the deistic belief that God is not involved in the world.

### III. THEISM

Theism, also called *monotheism*, is the belief that there is one God who created the universe and continues to guide events in the world. The three main theistic religions are Judaism, Islam and Christianity. They share many common roots, including some of the same prophets and Scriptures. However, they have very different views as to the nature of God and the identity of the *mediator* between God and man. Theism is illustrated in Figure 8.3.

**Figure 8.3**  
**Theistic Worldview**



#### A. Judaism

Judaism is the earliest of the major theistic religions, and the source from which the other two, Islam and Christianity, developed. Jews believe in one and only one God—YHWY—as revealed in the Old Testament (Ex 3:14). They address the worldview questions in the following way:

- Is there a supernatural force at work in the world? – *“Yes, YHWY is the only God, and there are also the less powerful demons and angels.”*
- Where did I come from? – *“God created mankind and I am a spiritual descendent of Abraham.”*
- Why do I exist? – *“I am here to obey God’s law.”*
- What happens when I die? – *“If I follow the Law of Moses, I will spend eternity with God.”*
- What is right and what is wrong? – *“The moral will of God is presented in the Torah and summarized in the Ten Commandments.”*

In Judaism, the mediator between God and man is Moses, who received the Torah directly from God on the mountain and delivered it to the Israelites. Jews please God, who in turn blesses their lives, when they obey the commands of the Torah and observe its sacrifices, rituals, ceremonies and sacred days.

Jews are the ethnic descendents of Abraham through his son Isaac—later named Israel. By accepting the ritual of circumcision and following the Jewish laws, a Gentile can become a convert to Judaism and be considered a spiritual “son of Abraham.” As a result, they become part of the promises and blessings to the nation of Israel and will be part of God’s eternal kingdom with the future coming of the Messiah, who will be God’s anointed ruler.

Jews are the ethnic children of Abraham through his son *Isaac*. Their mediator is *Moses*.

The Jewish faith in the Old Testament is both a help and hindrance when ministering to Jews. Since Christians also believe that the Old Testament is God’s Word, we have a good starting point for discussion. We share a respect for the Old Testament prophets and a belief that Israel is God’s chosen people. Many Old Testament passages clearly refer to Christ and are explained and quoted widely in the New Testament.

When witnessing to Jews, we face the same resistance as Christ and the apostles did. Jews understand God’s revelation to be closed with the writing of the Old Testament. They reject Christ and the New Testament. They believe that Christ cannot be divine if God is one (Dt 6:4). There is no secret method to evangelize Jews—the best way is to imitate the method of Christ and the early New Testament church and explain clearly from the Law and the prophets all the things that were prophesied about Christ (Lk 24:27).

## B. Islam

Muslims (people who submit to Islam) also believe that there is only one God, and that His name is Allah. Their holy book is the Koran, written by Muhammad. Muslims address the worldview questions in the following way:

- Is there a supernatural force at work in the world? – *“Yes, Allah is the only God, and there are also less powerful demons and angels.”*
- Where did I come from? – *“God created mankind and I am a spiritual descendant of Abraham.”*
- Why do I exist? – *“I am created to serve the will of Allah.”*
- What happens when I die? – *“If my good deeds for Allah outweigh my bad, I will spend eternity in Paradise.”*
- What is right and what is wrong? – *“I must keep the Five Pillars of Islam (creed, prayer, alms, fasting, pilgrimage).”*

Islam was founded in the sixth century by Muhammad, who claimed to have received the Koran from the angel Gabriel. Since Muhammad was surrounded by Jewish and weak Christian influences, the Koran includes many pieces from both the Old and New Testaments. Often, however, the stories and teachings are distorted from the original texts in Scripture. Perhaps the main emphasis of the Koran is a militant rejection of the rampant polytheism of Muhammad’s day.

Muslims consider themselves to be the spiritual descendents of Abraham through his son Ishmael, instead of through Isaac. Therefore, the relationship of Muslims and Jews has often resembled a bitter family feud between two sons over their father’s inheritance. Both believe they should receive the land (Palestine) and the blessings given to Abraham by God—a conflict that continues today.

Muslims are the spiritual children of Abraham through his son *Ishmael*. Their mediator is *Muhammad*.

Ministry to Muslims is very difficult because, like Judaism, Islam so strongly rejects the idea that Christ is God. However, Muslims also reject the Old Testament, so there is less common ground to begin discussion about the Gospel. Perhaps the best opening for ministry to Muslims results from their view of Allah—He is harsh and unforgiving. He may be merciful, but unlike Jesus, He does not love us. The only way a Muslim can have assurance of eternal life is through martyrdom in jihad (struggle for Allah).

Islamic cultures tend to be very hospitable and to emphasize relationships, but Muslims cannot have a relationship with Allah. Furthermore, the fatalistic nature of Islam can be very discouraging—they must be resigned to the fact that Allah has already determined what will happen in their lives. The quiet confidence of Christians that their lives are directed by their loving Father is a powerful witness to Muslims. It brings their understanding of Allah into conflict with the desire that God has placed in every person for a relationship with Him.

### C. Christianity

The third major theistic religion is Christianity. Christians believe in one God in three Persons (the *Trinity*) as revealed in the Bible. We address the worldview questions in the following way:

- Is there a supernatural force at work in the world? – *“Yes, there is one God in three Persons, and the less powerful demons and angels.”*
- Where did I come from? – *“I am a descendent of Adam and Eve, who were created by God.”*
- Why do I exist? – *“I exist to glorify God.”*
- What happens when I die? – *“Believers in Christ go into eternal glory with Him, while unbelievers go into eternal judgment in the lake of fire.”*
- What is right and what is wrong? – *“Obeying God’s commands in the Bible and serving Him is right, and everything that does not honor Him is sin.”*

Christianity accepts the entire Old Testament, as do Jews, but we believe that the New Testament completes the full revelation of God. The cornerstone of Christianity is the belief that God exists as three Persons—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—and yet is one God. This concept defies human understanding, but fits perfectly with the fact that the Bible

asserts there is only one God, but also refers to each Person of the Trinity as God (Ro 1:7; Jn 1:1; Act 5:3-4). Being a Christian demands that we believe facts about the nature of the Trinity and of the Incarnation of Christ even though our finite human minds cannot fully understand them. These doctrines are confirmed, however, by thousands of years of miracles and fulfilled prophecies, as well as by the life and resurrection of Jesus.

Christians are the spiritual children of God through His son **Jesus**. Our mediator is **Christ**.

When we preach the Gospel to various cultures, we are offering answers to the basic worldview questions that resonate with the God-given desires in every person for meaning and relationship. Christianity also offers an explanation for sin and suffering, good and evil that fits with the internal prompting of our consciences. Therefore, the strongest Christian witness is believers who love God and one another, live in hope, reject evil and do good.

Each of the three theistic religions has the same geographical roots in the ancient Near East and share some common sacred stories and events. However, there are major differences between them—particularly their view of God, of the most sacred text, and of the mediator between God and man. Table 8.1 below compares the core beliefs of the three religions.

**Table 8.1 Comparison of the Three Theistic Religions**

	<b>believe they are:</b>	<b>through:</b>	<b>as written by:</b>	<b>in the:</b>	<b>if they:</b>
<b>Jews</b>	Sons of Abraham	Isaac	Moses	Torah	obey God
<b>Muslims</b>	Sons of Abraham	Ishmael	Muhammad	Koran	serve Allah
<b>Christians</b>	Sons of God	Christ	Holy Spirit	Bible	trust Christ

When Christians witness in Islamic or Jewish cultures, there are many points of similarity where they may begin a dialog. In essence, we all share a similar *theistic worldview*. However, the Gospel gives a very different understanding of the nature of God and the identity of the mediator. The deity of Christ and the authority of Scripture are essential to Christianity—neither can be neglected in order to avoid conflict. And indeed, there has historically been tremendous conflict between these three religions with similar worldviews.

## CONCLUSION

The first and most important thing that we should remember about worldviews is that this lesson and the previous one have offered a very simplistic, generalized description of the major worldviews. There are endless variations—in fact, almost every person looks at the world a bit differently than every other person. These lessons have presented some of the widely-used responses to the “big questions” of life. They are a starting point for your own exploration of the culture in which you minister.

A second important thing to take away from these lessons is that the way people view God and the supernatural is the most important of the worldview questions. We cannot answer the questions about our purpose or future until we have decided if God exists, if He is personal, and to what degree He is involved in the world. Our view of God also mostly determines our view of right and wrong. Therefore, it is futile to attempt to change the way people live without changing their foundational understanding of God. Explaining God to the best of our ability, limited though our knowledge may be, is the most important part of making disciples.

A third thing that this study can show us is the importance of presenting the Gospel to each culture in a way that responds to the shortcomings of their worldviews. We know that God has created everyone with an awareness of His existence, a conscience that convict us of sin, and a sense that more exists than what we see (Ro 1:20; 2:15; Ecc 3:11). None of the non-Christian worldviews adequately answer the questions about our existence and destiny. We know that the true answer is God, but often people are not ready to consider Him until they see that their worldview does not satisfy their own needs and desires. Our goal is to present Christ, but the wisest path is usually a discussion of the nature of mankind. In other words, we must help them identify their problem before we offer a solution.

None of the non-Christian worldviews adequately answer the questions about our existence and destiny.

## QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION, REVIEW AND APPLICATION

- We believe in the existence of demons and angels. How does our view of God make us different than an animist who also believes in spirits?
- Deists believe God exists, but does not really affect our lives. In what practical ways does your personal faith in Christ change the way you live?
- In what ways do you see evidence around you that everyone, even unbelievers, seem to have a consciousness of right and wrong and an awareness of the supernatural?
- Since Judaism, Islam and Christianity are all theistic religions, why do you think there has historically been so much animosity between them?

## ACTION PLAN

- In the previous lesson you wrote down the “big questions” and the suggested answers and showed them to people from the culture where you minister. You then used their responses to develop a more accurate description of their worldview and compared it to Christianity. Reexamine the answers in light of the new information in this lesson to see if you can improve your description of their worldview even further.
- Identify any group or groups in your ministry area that might have the worldviews described in this lesson. How might some of their beliefs have influenced the cultural group to whom you primarily minister?
- Write down your own answers to the worldview questions. Then compare them to the suggested answers for a Christian worldview. Do they match? What are the differences? Look for ways that your own cultural background and ethnic worldview might have influenced the way you answered the questions. Clarify in your own thinking the answers that you are trying to present to your ministry group.

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# The Indigenous Church [3]

## FITTING THE CULTURE

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### ☞ Lesson Purpose

The purpose of this lesson is to explain the characteristics of an indigenous church and to examine whether typical church planting models lead to this kind of church.

### ☞ Main Points

- The Three-Self model describes a church that can stand on its own, but does not identify the characteristics that make a church fit into the local culture rather than simply being a viable foreign entity.
- A workable definition of an indigenous church must focus on the nature of the church as the corporate believers in Christ—not a building or organization.
- The way the early church in the New Testament dealt with the Jew vs. Gentile conflict can provide examples of ways to form an indigenous church that fits the culture.
- Truly indigenous churches imitate the life of Christ by demonstrating what transformed, holy living looks like in the local culture.

### ☞ Desired Outcomes

When the content of this lesson has been mastered, each participant should

- Be able to explain the shortcomings of the Three-Self model of an indigenous church.
- Know how the early church dealt with cross-cultural issues in a way that led to indigenous Jewish and indigenous Gentile churches among their respective populations.
- Understand how the incarnation of Christ serves as a model for cross-cultural ministry as well as a basis for the atonement.

## INTRODUCTION

The previous lessons helped us to understand the worldviews of the cultural groups *from which* church planters will form new churches. This lesson will focus on what the church *into which* they will assimilate will look like. What will the “planted” church look like? How will it be like the culture and how will it be different?

Lesson 1 explained the importance of *planting* a church that fits the culture instead of *transplanting* a “foreign” variety. There are two compelling reasons to give careful thought to planting a church that possesses the central characteristics of the new culture:

1. to ensure that the new church will thrive, grow and reproduce in the culture
2. to maintain the God-given cultural diversity that brings glory to the Creator

The term most commonly used to describe an appropriate church for the culture is “*indigenous*.” One dictionary defines indigenous as “originating in and characteristic of a particular region or country; native.” Therefore, an indigenous church must have characteristics that are native to the region and culture in which it is located.

Unfortunately, one of the main indigenous church planting models of the past century falls short of this basic requirement.

An indigenous church must have characteristics that are native to the region and culture in which it is located.

## I. THE THREE-SELF MODEL

For many years, the most common model for explaining what an indigenous church should look like has been the Three-Self Model, which was primarily developed for Western missions that were planting churches in other countries and therefore reflects their concerns about paternalism. This model is often indiscriminately applied to both individual local churches and national groups of churches with little thought to the fact that these are distinct situations. The Three-Self model says an indigenous church is one that is self-governing, self-supporting and self-propagating. While those three characteristics may be desirable, modern missiologists have begun to question whether they really are the best description of an indigenous church. This model is so common that we will look at each of its three parts in more detail.

### A. Self-Governing

The idea of a self-governing church is a bit misleading. It does not mean that the church cannot be connected to any higher authority such as a denomination. Rather, the intent is that the church should have local leadership in place to supervise the normal daily operations of the church. Specifically, the church should not depend on the direction of an outsider or foreigner who could easily be withdrawn. To be indigenous according to this model, the church members should be able to run the church on their own.

The weakness of this requirement is that it emphasizes *who* governs the church rather than *how* the church is governed. It does not place any limits on the nature of the church government. Suppose a church has had a foreign leadership style and structure imposed upon it but which is now being directed by local believers according to that pattern. The Three Self Model would declare that church to be indigenous. In reality, it may not be at all appropriate for the culture. A church that has an authoritarian, abusive leadership may be self-governing, but it would not be a good church. Church leaders are to shepherd the church with humility, sacrifice, and by becoming examples (1Pe 5:1-4). Church government must match these traits in order to be biblical.

The weakness of this requirement is that it emphasizes *who* governs the church rather than *how* the church is governed.

### B. Self-Supporting

The Three Self Model also says that a church must have the means to meet its own financial needs rather than depend on an outside or foreign source. Clearly, this is a desirable goal. A church that can support itself financially is more likely to be able to multiply by supporting the planting of daughter churches. Furthermore, a church that needs outside funding has a greater chance of unhealthy dependency and pressure to conform to a foreign standard rather than following the course of growth and development that the Holy Spirit reveals to them through their own interaction with the Word.

The weakness of the self-supporting requirement is that it can lead to an over-emphasis on the individual church and an under-emphasis on the interdependence of the universal Church. In extreme application, it would seem to say that whether or not a group of believers is a “church” depends on the state of the financial books. This is clearly a drastic departure from any definition of the church that appears in Scripture. Any part of the body of Christ can experience difficult times and need the support of other believers.

The self-supporting requirement can lead to an over-emphasis on the individual church and an under-emphasis on the interdependence of the universal Church.

### C. Self-Propagating

This part of the model says that an indigenous church will be able to multiply and reproduce itself without outside assistance. In practice, it has been more common to apply this to national groups of churches by understanding it to mean that foreign missionaries were no longer needed. This application gained credence because it was all too often assumed that a

typical local church—no matter how *planted*—would not reproduce. Sadly, multiplication was considered to be the collective responsibility of church denominations or fellowships, and too ambitious for individual churches.

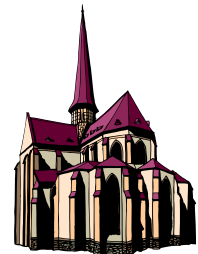
The positive result of the self-propagation requirement was that it was at least assumed that *someone* would plant new churches *somehow*. It made the status quo unacceptable—at least for groups of churches. However, the mechanism by which this would happen was unfortunately left undeveloped. As a result, it was possible for each church to assume that another congregation would multiply if they did not, effectively shifting away the responsibility that every believer and church has to make new disciples (Mt 28:18-20).

## II. THE NATURE OF THE CHURCH

The Three-Self Model for the indigenous church seems to make “indigenous” synonymous with “not foreign-controlled.” But perhaps an even bigger weakness of this model is that it allows confusion about the definition and nature of the church. There is nothing in the Three-Self Model that is exclusive to the church and would not apply to an indigenous business or organization. The church is too important to be treated as just another social entity.

### A. Common Misrepresentations

Supposed you were to go almost anywhere in the world where Christianity is present and ask, “Where is the church?” In almost every instance, you would be directed to the local church *building*. Even believers are guilty of this sloppy theological thinking. We emphasize the building so much that many Christians do not think they are really a church unless they own a special building in which they can meet. Not only that, but in most regions of the world, a building is expected to conform to a specific architectural style in order to truly be considered a church.



Somewhat better, but still not accurate are those people who think of the church in terms of an organization that engages in specific religious activities or services. For example, they must meet together on Sunday mornings, or operate charitable or relief services in the community. Or they have leaders who dress in robes, they light candles, they form choirs, etc. A church may do any of these things, but they do not define what the church is.

### B. Believers in Christ

The *universal Church* is comprised of all the people that Christ has redeemed with His blood (Ac 20:28). The *local church* is the believers in Christ that live in geographical proximity to one another and are therefore able to meet together regularly for worship, edification, equipping, and to engage in the sacraments of the church. Simply put, the church is *people*, specifically *those people who are saved by the blood of Christ*.

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The early Church met in homes, Jewish synagogues, the Jewish temple, and in open courtyards and squares. The church building is a later, unfortunate, and often burdensome addition to the common understanding of a church. The effort of so many congregations to obtain these unbiblical structures consumes the valuable time and resources that could and should be used to make disciples in the local body and the world. Of course, having a place for the local church to meet is not necessarily a bad thing—especially in inclement weather—but it becomes negative when it hinders the more important work of the church.

The core purpose of the local church is to bring together the believers on a regular basis so that they can help one another to grow and mature in their relationship to the Lord and to prepare for ministry among the body and in the world. The local church is the place where corporate prayer, worship, teaching, encouragement, fellowship, exhortation, discipline, edification and equipping take place. Therefore, an *indigenous local church* would be one



where these activities are done in a way that is appropriate for the local culture. For example, insofar as Scripture allows, teaching would conform to the way that people in the local culture best learn, worship styles would encourage local cultural expression, fellowship would fit the social preferences of the local culture, etc.

An *indigenous local church* would be one where these activities are done in a way that is appropriate for the local culture.

### III. INDIGENOUS CHURCHES IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

The New Testament does not give us a definitive explanation of how church planting was done by the Early Church, but it does include many helpful examples of the practice of the apostles. By examining their interaction with the new churches they planted, we can get an idea of the traits that they considered important in an indigenous church.

#### A. Church Finances

There are many New Testament passages that refer to finances, but we are specifically concerned with the flow of finances between new church plants and other churches. The first thing that we notice is that there are no biblical instances of financial support being sent from a “mother church” to a church plant. Rather, the opposite is true. The new churches in Asia Minor took up a collection to send to the Jerusalem church during a time of famine in Israel (1Co 16:1-4).

The only recorded missionary giving from the “mother” churches was towards the support of the church planters. The Philippian church supported Paul’s ministry in Thessalonica and Rome despite their poverty (2Co 8:1-4; Php 4:10-19). John also urged believers to support those sent out for missionary ministry (3Jn 1:5-8).

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The Apostle Paul never suggested financial support for new churches, but instead clearly stated that he had the *right to receive* support from the churches that he planted (1Co 9:6-14). However, he often laid aside that right, serving at his own expense and working to earn his living while ministering without charge in the church plants (Ac 18:3; 1Co 9:15; 2Co 11:7-9).

#### B. Church Government

The New Testament pattern is clear—the Apostles spent a very short time at each church they planted. They quickly identified faithful believers and appointed them as elders and deacons over the work. The emphasis of their time with the new disciples was on leading godly lives, praying and studying the Scriptures, and worshipping together. There is very little in the way of instruction about what kind of structure the new church should have or how it should be governed. It appears that these kinds of decisions were left to the local believers.

Although the New Testament says little about organizational structure, it says a great deal about church leadership. Paul explained and defended his methods of church planting and leadership throughout Acts and in many of the Epistles. He spent years training Timothy, Titus, Epaphroditus, and others for ministry in the churches. The letters of 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus are essentially guidance on how to direct the new churches for which they were responsible. Likewise, the epistles of Peter and John contain quite a bit of instruction about how to lead the church and how to become worthy leaders.

The emphasis on church leadership in the New Testament focuses on the importance of modeling holiness and maintaining sound doctrine (Eph 4:14; 1Ti 4:6; Tit 1:9; 2:7). The importance of leading as a servant of the Lord, rather than for personal gain is also stressed (Mt 20:25; Mr 10:42; Lk 22:25; 2Co 1:24; 1Pe 5). In many cases the newly-established churches already included mature Jewish believers with a thorough knowledge of Old Testament theology. They understood the basic issues of sin and the holiness of God. They needed to add to that knowledge the concept of grace, salvation by faith, and the triune nature

of God, among other things. The presence of these potential leaders may explain why the apostles were able to establish the churches so quickly, and may not match the experience of modern church planters working in areas with little historical exposure to Christian truth.

### C. Church Buildings

Essentially, church buildings did not exist in the New Testament. That does not mean it is wrong to have a building, but they certainly are not essential to the growth of the church. The apostles began new churches by going to wherever they could find people who might be interested in spiritual things. In Philippi, that was a riverbank “place of prayer” (Ac 16:13). More typically, they went to the synagogues (Ac 13:14; 14:1; 17:1, 10; 18:4). After they had won a few converts, they were normally rejected from the synagogues and began to meet in homes (Ac 12:12; 16:15, 40; 20:20).

In fact, homes became the main location of churches (Ro 16:5; 1Co 16:19; Col 4:15; Phm 1:2). One of the only examples of a meeting in a larger structure was Paul’s “seminary” in Ephesus which met for two years in the school of Tyrannus (Ac 19:9-10). Whether or not it was their intention, the lack of dedicated Christian buildings certainly helped them to promote the idea that “God does not live in temples made by men,” but in believers (Ac 17:24; 1Co 3:16; 6:19). If someone in the New Testament had asked where they could find the church, they would never have been directed to a building!

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### D. Church Multiplication

When we refer to “church multiplication” in the New Testament, of course, we are talking about the establishment of groups of believers throughout every region. The emphasis was never on statistics, but about the effective spread of the Gospel message. What happened while Paul was at Ephesus is instructive.

*But when some were becoming hardened and disobedient, speaking evil of the Way before the people, he [Paul] withdrew from them and took away the disciples, reasoning daily in the school of Tyrannus. This took place for two years, so that all who lived in Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks. (Ac 19:9-10)*

We should note that there is no indication that Paul ever left Ephesus during that time. He trained faithful men, who in turn multiplied Paul’s ministry by telling others until everyone in the region heard the Gospel. This matches the instructions he gave to Timothy (2Ti 2:2). Unhindered by building campaigns and complex church organizational needs, Paul was free to focus on preaching the Word and making disciples. This strategy was so effective that he had to find a new area to plant churches.

*For I will not presume to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me, resulting in the obedience of the Gentiles by word and deed, in the power of signs and wonders, in the power of the Spirit; so that from Jerusalem and round about as far as Illyricum I have fully preached the gospel of Christ. And thus I aspired to preach the gospel, not where Christ was already named, so that I would not build on another man’s foundation; but as it is written, “THEY WHO HAD NO NEWS OF HIM SHALL SEE, AND THEY WHO HAVE NOT HEARD SHALL UNDERSTAND.” For this reason I have often been prevented from coming to you; but now, with no further place for me in these regions, and since I have had for many years a longing to come to you whenever I go to Spain—for I hope to see you in passing. . . (Ro 15:18-24)*

Certainly there were places in Asia Minor where Paul had not preached! But it is quite possible that his disciples, or those trained by his “faithful men” had preached the Gospel in every corner of the region. While there was without doubt need in many places for more evangelism and pastoral ministry, it was more important for Paul the “church planter” to move on to the other regions and cultures where Christ was not known.

## E. Church and Culture

Although the New Testament says little about church buildings, it says much about the interaction of Christianity and culture. The small group of Jewish believers among whom the church was initially founded soon struggled with how to assimilate huge numbers of Gentile believers who brought cultural differences into the body (Ac 1:15; 2:41; 4:4). Cultural issues caused the discord over the care for widows in Acts 6. It led to the confrontation with Peter in Acts 11 over his evangelism of Cornelius. And ultimately, it resulted in the important church council about the role of circumcision in Acts 15.

The Jewish vs. Gentile culture clash was not confined to the church. The believers also struggled with how to minister in places with unbelieving Jewish populations. The approach they adopted can be summed up by Paul's willingness to "become all things to all men in order to reach all men" (1Co 9:19-23). That is, Paul laid aside his cultural preferences in order to better relate to the people to whom he was preaching, whether Greek, Jew, slave, freeman, etc. We must carefully note that Paul's open-mindedness did not permit him to engage in sinful behavior just because the local culture allowed it. Rather, Paul attempted to adapt to the host culture as much as possible without compromising biblical standards.

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One of the most informative cultural conflicts in Acts was over the issue of circumcision. At the Jerusalem council in Acts 15, Paul forcefully argued that the Gentiles should not be required to be circumcised. The Apostles agreed with his argument and sent him back to the Gentile churches with a letter affirming that Gentiles should not be required to be circumcised (Ac 15:22-31). In light of this clear decision, what Paul did next is surprising. He chose Timothy to help him in his missionary ministry and immediately circumcised him (Ac 16:1-3)! Why? Because Paul planned to minister in Jewish areas where the issue of circumcision was divisive. Therefore, even though Paul knew and preached that circumcision was not necessary for salvation and the Christian life, he felt that Timothy's uncircumcised state would be an obstacle when they presented the Gospel to the Jews.

The Jerusalem council applied the same logic. Their instructions to the Gentile believers not only forbade the sins of idolatry and fornication, but also the eating of meat that was strangled rather than having the blood drained (Ac 15:20). Why did they add that prohibition? They explained the reason—"... for Moses from ancient generations has in every city those who preach him, since he is read in the synagogues every Sabbath" (Ac 15:21). They did not want the Gentile believers to flaunt their freedom in Christ in a way that would handicap their witness to their Jewish neighbors by eating meat in a fashion that the Jews considered to be immoral.

Church planters must carefully evaluate how to balance the Gospel message with the moral values of the local culture. This is often difficult, and will not always be successful. Even though Paul diligently purified himself in Jerusalem to placate the Jews, they falsely accused him of violating the temple and attacked him (Ac 21:14-30). Nevertheless, we should try not to needlessly offend.

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This principle affects not only how we relate to unbelievers, but to new Christians who are weak and immature in their faith. Paul wrote to both the Corinthian and Roman churches about this situation (1Co 8, 9; Ro 14). Meat presented as offerings to pagan temples was often resold in the market. He told the believers that although they had the Christian right to buy and eat this meat, they should refrain if it was a stumbling block for a weaker brother in the Lord. Some cults and even some believers have erroneously concluded that it is better to never do anything that offends another person and that it is more spiritual to refrain from as many things as possible. However, in these passages, the one who conscious is offended is clearly the less spiritual Christian. Mature believers know and understand their freedom. Our

goal should be to *temporarily* limit some offensive things until we can help the weaker brothers to have a better understanding of the truth of the Gospel.

#### IV. TRULY “INDIGENOUS” CHURCHES FIT THEIR CULTURE

While the Three-Self model of an indigenous church is helpful, it is not sufficient. The historical examples of the early church show that a truly “*indigenous*” church must also be culturally-appropriate. A description of an indigenous church should do each of the following things:

##### A. Transform Believers

The Church does, did, and always will consist of sinners redeemed by the blood of Christ. Likewise the local church is the collective believers in a geographical location meeting together for fellowship, worship, and equipping for ministry. It is never a building, an organization, or anything else besides transformed people.

Every culture is different, and each culture includes God-given traits and sinful values. An indigenous church is a group of believers who have learned how to emphasize the righteous aspects of their culture and to reform their unholy tendencies. They should organize and structure their activities in a way that focuses on and directly addresses their unique problems and possibilities. They should excel at taking sinners in their culture and discipling them to become worthy of the name “Sons of God.”

##### B. Thrive and Reproduce

An indigenous church should resemble its local culture enough that people of that culture would agree that it is not something “foreign.” Cultural preferences such as dress, music, social customs, buildings, etc., should resemble the secular culture as much as possible without incorporating sinful elements. The culture of the indigenous church should look like a “cleaned up,” “sanctified” version of the local culture.

An indigenous church should resemble its local culture enough that people of that culture would agree that it is not something “foreign.”

Furthermore, an indigenous church that has a similar educational and financial status as its culture will have greater success at multiplication. They must adopt structures and activities that new congregations will be able to afford. They also need to use methods of training leaders and discipling new converts that new churches will be able to model and implement without undue burden.

##### C. Engage the Culture

An indigenous church should always be sensitive to how they can engage their culture in the least offensive way. Some parts of the Gospel are inherently offensive—it declares every person to be a sinner (Ro 3:9-20). The idea of a crucified Christ is a “stumbling block” to many (Ro 9:32-33; 1Co 1:23; 1Pe 2:6-8). We cannot faithfully preach the truth and avoid all offense. However, we can strive to not be needlessly offensive. In other words, they might reject the Gospel message, but we should try to keep them from being offended by us. We should, like Paul, do everything we can to become like them (except sin) in order to win them (1Co 9:19-23). Likewise, the church as a congregation should also conform to the local culture as much as possible without violating God’s law.

We cannot faithfully preach the truth and avoid all offense.

##### D. Transform the Culture

When the indigenous church fits into the culture, it will be easier to convince unbelievers to listen to the Gospel message and easier for them to be positively influenced by the lifestyles of the believers. There is a greater chance that they will not see the church as calling them to abandon their heritage, but to sanctify their culture and make it pleasing to God. Ideally, they will understand that the Gospel will improve their culture rather than reject it.

Sin has so permeated humanity that no culture is holy. The evidence of sin is everywhere. Almost everyone knows that their culture is not perfect. The indigenous church can have a powerful testimony if it can demonstrate that it can improve the way people live in the culture. Some of the key areas include:

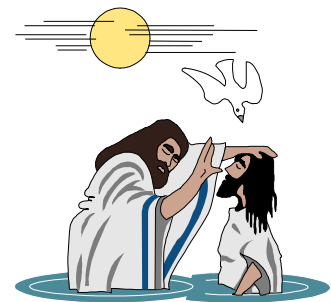
- Families that love and support one another while respecting the acceptable morals and values of the culture
- Leaders that reflect the leadership style of the culture, but demonstrate a servant heart by exercising care and concern for followers
- Business practices that are honest and dependable
- Hospitality to neighbors and strangers alike
- Loving, supportive relationships among believers
- Love and concern for unbelievers—even enemies
- An attitude of hope and confidence in the Lord’s provision
- Rejection of ungodly and harmful attitudes and practices

### E. Adopt Meaningful Forms

An indigenous church will carefully choose its forms so that they communicate biblical truth clearly to people in its culture. There are three ways to accomplish this:

#### 1. *Incorporate cultural forms that communicate truth*

Water baptism was practiced by many different groups as a symbol of commitment to a cause or belief. John the Baptist gave it the special meaning of repenting in preparation for the coming of the Messiah (Mt 3:1-2). Jesus then used the idea of baptism by fire to explain the coming of the Holy Spirit upon believers (Mt 3:11; Ac 2:1-4; 11:15-16). Finally, water baptism became the symbol that a person has believed in Christ and been saved (Ac 8:36; 10:47). The essential idea of commitment was retained, but the object of belief was changed from the Messiah, to the Holy Spirit, to Christ.



Modern cultures may have forms that can easily carry new Christian meaning. For example, redemptive analogies (to be discussed in Lesson 14) are existing rituals and ceremonies that teach concepts that are completely compatible with Christianity. Wiser church planters take advantage of these similarities by using them to explain the Gospel.

#### 2. *Reject cultural forms that are tainted by association with evil*

Some cultural forms are so deeply connected to pagan or evil practices and traditions that they should never be used by the church in that culture. It is not because the forms themselves are evil, but that people will not be able to forget the ungodly things that they once signified. This needs to be evaluated in every location. For instance, in one culture drums might be simply a common musical instrument and should be used in the church. In another, drums might be so tied to worship of demons that it would offend the conscience of believers and send the wrong message to unbelievers. Or, a particular rhythm might have evil connotations and other styles would be fine.

The same issue can be caused by a limitless number of forms. Evil meaning might be associated with certain foods, dress, dances, music, locations, motions, gestures, holidays, rituals, etc. There is no universal right or wrong forms. Only the local believers will be able to make this determination. They are the ones who know what message the forms communicate to them and to unbelievers. If they communicate a message that is opposed to Christ, they must be rejected.

### 3. *Redeem forms that can be positive if redefined*

Some symbols or forms may be ambiguous. They don't promote evil, but they don't have a message either. Occasionally they can be given entirely new meaning. For instance, the cross was used by Rome for executions as a symbol of submission to the authority of Rome. While this involved suffering and punishment, it did not represent an evil act. The Apostles supported the authority of the state to punish criminals (Ro 13:1-5; 1Pe 2:13-14). The early church saw the cross instead as a reminder of the death of Christ for our salvation. The meaning for the church was entirely different from the meaning to Rome.

Some symbols or forms may be ambiguous. They don't promote evil, but they don't have a message either.

Any symbol must be evaluated according to local cultural understanding. Although the cross is perhaps one of the most powerful Christian symbols to believers, in much of the Muslim world it represents the hatred and violence of the Crusades. Many missiologists believe that Church planters in the Muslim world should avoid the symbol of the cross and refer instead to the death of Christ which is the underlying meaning. In Islamic cultures, the cross may belong in the previous category of forms that are too tainted by evil to be used in the church. The truth of Christ's sacrificial atonement must be taught, but not necessarily through this form if it is too offensive to the culture.

## F. Resemble Christ

Jesus is always the ultimate model for Christians. Our goal is to act as He would act. His life also serves as an example of how to effectively make disciples in a cross-cultural situation. Although Jesus existed eternally as God, when He came to earth, He took on human form (Php 2:5-11). It was necessary for Him to become man in order to take our punishment for sin, but the way He lived goes beyond what was required for our atonement. He could have saved us without being born in a poor Jewish family, escaping to Egypt as a refugee from Herod's persecution, and working as a carpenter to care for his widowed mother and siblings (Mk 2:4-7; Mt 2:13-15; 13:55). Jesus not only became a man, He became a low-income Jewish laborer like most of the people who lived near Him in Galilee.



Jesus was still fully God even though He lived among us in human form. However, He so looked and acted like the local Jewish population that almost no one suspected that He was God. They assumed He was one of them, even though they occasionally noted that He had amazing spiritual understanding and lived a life that they admired (Lk 2:47, 52). In this way, Jesus was a great model of a cross-cultural missionary. He adapted the way He lived to fit the culture, yet was without sin (Heb 4:15).

We must be careful to remember that the primary purpose of the church (that is, believers) is to resemble Christ. Our model is not the church planter, the sending culture, the receiving culture, or any person or institution. We are to do, as much as possible, what Jesus did—demonstrate how a godly member of the local culture would live and act. When cross-cultural church planters do that, they prepare the foundations for an indigenous church. And when the new believers do the same, they become a truly indigenous church.

## QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION, REVIEW AND APPLICATION

- How does the economic level of the culture in which you minister compare to your home area? What adjustments would you have to make to your church plant in order for it to be financially viable in this environment?
- If there are established churches in the region where you minister, how well do you think they fit the local culture, and to what degree are they “foreign?”

- What are some of the significant strengths of the local culture that should be encouraged in the new church?
- What are some of the ungodly characteristics of the local culture that need to be eliminated from the new church?
- One of the major conflicts in the early church was the clash between Jewish and Gentile believers. Is the area in which you minister relatively homogeneous, or is there more than one strong cultural influence that must be reconciled and included in a new church plant?

## **ACTION PLAN**

- Spend some time imagining what an ideal believer might look like in the culture in which you minister. What negative cultural traits would he have to overcome? What positive characteristics from the culture would he retain? How would he interact with neighbors? Family? Coworkers? Political or other authorities? Other believers? Write a paragraph or more describing that ideal believer in as much detail as you can. When you are finished, review it to make sure that someone who matched that description would be uniquely identified as a member of the local culture. Revise if necessary.
- Now imagine a church full of believers like the one above. How would they worship? Disciple? Evangelize? Train new leaders? Write a paragraph or more describing what that church would look like. Review your statement to make sure it describes a church that would easily be identified as belonging to the local culture. Revise if necessary.
- List some of the specific steps you could take in your church planting ministry to make sure you develop disciples and a church that has the characteristics you listed above. Review this list from time to time as you minister to see if you are still on the right course and revise it as necessary.

## **SOURCES**

- Winter, Ralph D. and Steven C. Hawthorne, *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed. Pasadena, CA. William Carey Library, 1999.
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DELTA COURSE

LESSON **10**

# Studying Culture [2]

## LOOKING FOR THE *WHAT* AND *WHY* OF CULTURE

### ☞ Lesson Purpose

The purpose of this lesson is to introduce the fundamentals of culture study and explain the process by which cross-cultural church planters can apply them to understand and minister effectively to another culture.

### ☞ Main Points

- Cultural traits reveal the hidden worldview of a culture in much the same way as the shape of a person indicates the kind of skeleton that lies underneath.
- In order to understand a culture, we must become learners before we can be teachers.
- Cultural researchers have identified a number of universal cultural dimensions that are very helpful in understanding and describing the nature of any culture.
- The key to understanding another culture is to continually ask questions about *what* they do and *why* they do it.

### ☞ Desired Outcomes

When the content of this lesson has been mastered, each participant should

- Know that there are many different levels of culture.
- Understand the importance of taking time to learn about a new culture and become a positive Christian example before assuming the role of a teacher.
- Be able to use the universal cultural dimensions to identify the likely areas where culture differences may lead to miscommunication and conflict in ministry.

### ☞ Appendices

Appendix 10A Hofstede Categories

Appendix 10B Other Cultural Traits

Appendix 10C Grid/Group

Appendix 10D Practical Culture Questions

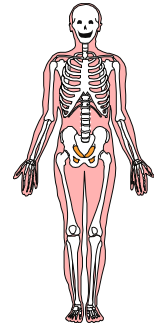
## INTRODUCTION

The previous lessons in this course have focused on the importance of retaining positive, God-given traits when planting a church among another culture. This was the pattern of the early church and the Apostles, although not without conflict and struggle. We have also discussed the importance of understanding worldview. We cannot bring true life transformation without altering a person's worldview so that it conforms to the truth taught by Scripture. Worldview and culture are different things, but are intricately connected to each other.

- **Worldview** – the foundational framework of belief about the “big questions of life.”
- **Culture** – the way a particular group of people thinks, acts and feels as a result of their beliefs and unique environment, whether consciously or unconsciously.



A helpful analogy is to think of *worldview* as a skeleton and *culture* as the flesh, muscles and organs which cover the bones. A person's skeleton is not visible, but it determines their basic properties such as height, shape of their head, etc. The flesh is visible, but must conform to the underlying skeletal structure. The environment also plays an important part. Two people with nearly identical skeletons might look very different depending on climate, diet, exercise, disease, etc. In the same way, worldview guides the development of culture, but does not completely determine it. The interaction of a people group with its environment and outsiders and between members will result in unique characteristics for that group.



## I. THE PURPOSE OF STUDYING CULTURE

For cross-cultural church planters, cultural study is not merely an academic exercise. The goal is not to become sociologists or anthropologists. Rather, the purpose is to understand the important traits of the culture in order to plant truly indigenous churches. Church planters do not need to understand all aspects of culture, but they must be able to make decisions about how to build relationships, present the Gospel message, teach, and train leaders in ways that fit the culture. Otherwise, their disciples will not be able to effectively carry on the work of the ministry and the new church will not grow and multiply within the local culture.

Understanding culture is complicated by the fact that there are many different levels of culture. For instance, there are:

- Multinational cultures – (Asian vs. African, etc.)
- National cultures – (Egyptian vs. Kenyan, etc.)
- National subcultures – (Iraqi Kurds vs. Iraqi Sunnis, etc.)
- Community cultures – (Suburban Berliners vs. Inner-city Berliners, etc.)
- Family cultures – (differences between every family)
- Individual cultures – (differences between every person)

Everyone is affected by all of these levels of culture, but it is unreasonable to expect anyone to be intimately familiar with the entire culture of every person. Fortunately, the broader levels of culture filter down to the more personal levels. In other words, a community will normally share basic cultural traits with the nation and continent in which it is located. In the example above, the culture of an inner-city community in Berlin would be expected to have both German and European characteristics. A church planter could focus on identifying the specific culture of the local community and helping grow a church that fits that situation. Even though family and individual cultures vary, the fact that they successfully live in the community indicates that they will be able to fit into the new church. Therefore, the community culture is the most important level for the church planter to understand.

The community culture is the most important level of culture for the church planter to understand.

There is a common twist to the example above. Suppose the community in Berlin happened to be predominantly immigrants from Algeria. They would be influenced by their German neighbors, language and laws and by European values and climate, but would also be shaped by Algerian culture. A church planter in that situation would need to understand basic cultural facts about Europeans, Germans, and Berliners, but would also have to learn about Algerian culture. Based on that knowledge, he could begin to evaluate how the “collision” of those two cultures resulted in a third culture that contains parts of both. When we mix blue and red paint, the result is purple paint. Similarly, when two “colors” of culture combined, they result in a third “color.” Even in this situation, the focus of the church planter must still be on this unique community culture.

## II. THE PROCESS OF STUDYING CULTURE

The key to studying culture as a church planter is humility. We may know a great deal about God, the Bible and Christianity, but we must admit that we do not understand another culture. We are “foreigners” and “outsiders.” We have different knowledge, values, morals, skills, goals, etc. The only way we will ever understand another culture is through patience, effort and skillful observation.

The key to studying culture as a church planter is humility.

Cultures are developed from the “inside-out” by the worldview beliefs that shape everything people do and think. We can’t see those worldview beliefs. Most people do not even understand their own worldview and are unable to explain it to us. The only way to gain insight is to observe the outward manifestations of the culture and try to detect the underlying reasons for them. Culture study, therefore, works from the “outside-in.” We must spend time as *learners* before we can be *teachers*.

### A. Be a Learner

Becoming a *learner* is difficult for many people because it requires them to admit that they don’t have all the answers. This can be especially difficult for missionary church planters who have come to a new culture specifically to *teach* the people about God. If they are highly motivated by the urgent need to share the Gospel—as they should be—they will find it frustrating to take time to understand the thinking of the people they have come to win. This becomes even more frustrating when there is a language barrier that may require months or even years of language study.

Why should we not begin to preach the Gospel immediately? After all, that appears to be what the Apostle Paul did. While this was the case in many of the examples in Acts, Paul already understood the language of the people as well as Jewish and Roman culture. Paul was already *bicultural*, having been born as both a Jew and a Roman citizen (Php 3:4-5; Ac 22:25-28). Furthermore, in most cities, Paul began his ministry among the Jewish population with whom he had the most in common. Cross-cultural church planters, by definition, do not have the bicultural understanding that Paul had. They will need to spend time as students of culture before they will be able to share the Gospel as effectively as Paul.

The best way to truly learn about another culture is to be immersed in it. There is no substitute for spending lots of time with the people you want to understand. It is also helpful to be with them in the widest possible variety of situations and circumstances. Attend and participate in any event or occasion that is not sinful, including:

There is no substitute for spending lots of time with the people you want to understand.

- recreation
- work
- social events
- family events
- community events
- weddings
- funerals
- sporting events
- etc.

Watch how people react and interact in different situations. Compare and contrast their responses to your own culture and identify similarities and differences. In each situation,

assume that there is a *reason* they respond as they do. Try to figure out what it might be. Be particularly sensitive to clues to their underlying worldview beliefs. Note especially the things that they value and what they believe to be right and wrong. Continue the process, by trial and error, until you feel confident that you have a good idea how they act and why they think the way they do. An outsider will never finish this task, but you must have a decent understanding of their culture before you can expect to become their teacher.

In each situation, assume that there is a *reason* they respond as they do. Try to figure out what it might be.

## B. Be an Example

There were many good men and women in the Old Testament who are examples of faith, but Jesus surpasses them all (Heb 11). We are to fix our eyes on Him, not on them (Heb 12:1-2). First of all, they were all tainted by sin and often made terrible mistakes. Secondly, they were examples to their *own cultures*, whereas Jesus came from heaven to become human and show us how a holy person should live (Php 2; Lk 2). He crossed the biggest cultural divide imaginable—from God to man. Christ is the ultimate example of a cross-cultural minister.

The goal of cross-cultural church planters is to imitate Christ, realizing we can never do that perfectly. This was Paul's strategy—he encouraged the new disciples to imitate him just as he imitated Christ (1Co 4:16; 11:1; 1Th 1:16). In other words, Paul sought to become the best example he could of a godly Jew or Gentile (depending on his audience). He wanted to show the Jews how to be genuinely Jewish and also please God and to show the Gentiles how to satisfy the Lord and still be Gentile.

Of course, before we can employ this strategy among a new culture, we need to have fulfilled the learner process and understand the unique, identifying characteristics of that culture. Then we can begin to model those same traits while refusing to entertain sin and incorporating godly character in ways that fit the culture. What are some practical ways we might do this in a particular culture?

- In a culture that values hospitality, but in which drunkenness is common, we should become examples of graciously receiving people into our homes and entertaining them well without the abuse of alcohol.
- In a culture that values relationships, but in which lying is the norm, we should become known as people who love others, but whose word is trustworthy.
- In a culture that values prosperity, but in which greed is common, we should become known as people who do not love money, but instead value other people.

The reason we should be examples is so that the local people desire to live as we do, leading to opportunities to share the faith that has changed us (1Ti 4:12; Tit 2:7; 1Pe 3:15). We cannot force them to listen to our wisdom. Rather, if we demonstrate that we know how to live well, they will invite us to teach them how to do the same.

## C. Be a Teacher

In many cases, the most difficult part of teaching is convincing our students to learn. When we put the learner and example stages in the proper order, we have a much greater chance of being successful and bringing life change. This is especially true with adult learners. They learn the things that they perceive to have immediate, helpful value to their own lives.

Another reason to resist teaching until we learn to be examples is that we are less likely to teach only academic facts. Our purpose as cross-cultural church planters is not to transfer facts from our brain (or books) to theirs, but to change their worldview and lifestyle. In other words, we are teaching them how to think and act, as well as what to believe.

Our purpose is not to transfer facts from our brain (or books) to theirs, but to change their worldview and lifestyle.

### III. UNIVERSAL CULTURAL DIMENSIONS

The task of understanding another culture can seem daunting. Perhaps the most difficult thing to understand is why people of another culture can encounter a particular situation and react so differently from the way we would respond. When this happens, it is usually caused by a differing set of “values.” That is, a particular result is more desirable to them than it would be to us.

There are many, many different approaches to describing and classifying the values of different cultures. They range from relatively simple and practical to extremely academic and complex. There are two important and opposing truths that the cross-cultural church planter should keep in mind. They may seem contradictory, but they are not.

1. There are fundamental, observable characteristics that the majority of people in each culture tend to share. People from the same culture tend to think and act in similar ways.
2. Within every culture, people share the common cultural characteristics to varying degrees. There is great diversity even among people of the same culture.

Every cross-cultural church planter would benefit from having at least a basic understanding of the major characteristics of culture. The sections below will give a brief overview of some of the most beneficial systems of organizing these characteristics. A more thorough explanation is included in the three appendices which follow this lesson. You are strongly encouraged to study more fully the appendices which are most helpful to you.

#### A. Hofstede’s Cultural Dimensions – Appendix 10A

In the 1970’s, Geert Hofstede studied the cultural differences of a large corporation (IBM) with offices in many different countries. As a result of his research, he identified five different cultural dimensions that can be rated as pairs.

- High power distance ← → low power distance
- Masculine ← → feminine
- Individual ← → collective
- High uncertainty avoidance ← → low uncertainty avoidance
- Virtue ← → truth

Hofstede explained how every culture will have unique scores in each of these cultural dimensions. We can compare the scores of different cultures in order to relate them to other cultures. As a result, cultural dimensions can help us to identify potential areas of conflict, miscommunication and misunderstanding. The wider the difference between the scores of two cultures, the more likely they will have problems in communicating and working together. This information is particularly useful for cross-cultural church planters because it can alert them to areas where they will need to be particularly careful as they live and minister to the new culture. Appendix 10A has more detail about Hofstede’s cultural dimensions.

Cultural dimensions can help us to identify potential areas of conflict, miscommunication and misunderstanding.

#### B. Other Cultural Traits – Appendix 10B

Many other cultural researchers have identified cultural dimensions that help to describe cultures. These other traits may or may not be as foundational as Hofstede’s, but they are nonetheless useful. There are many, many books and articles that promote these other cultural dimensions and explain them. They may be helpful for cross-cultural church planters who would like to understand more fully the different ways that the people to whom they minister look at various situations. Appendix 10B lists some of the more commonly-listed traits.

### C. Grid/Group – Appendix 10C

Another approach to identifying cultural traits is the Grid/Group approach developed by anthropologist Mary Douglas. Her theory is that every culture can be described by locating their place on two scales:

- High grid ← → low grid
- High group ← → low group

These scales are normally plotted on a two-dimensional graph. This approach is somewhat more complicated than other representations of culture, but is used in many studies and can be helpful to the church planter. Grid/Group is explained more fully in Appendix 10C.

## IV. SIFTING

The main reason to learn about the cultural dimensions in the previous section is so that we can be more aware of the ways that cultures differ. This, in turn, helps us to know the areas where we need to ask probing questions and carefully observe the way people respond to various situations. Again, the purpose is not to become experts on abstract behavioral traits. Rather, we are trying to discover culturally-appropriate ways to:

- effectively communicate the Gospel and disciple believers.
- build strong, mentoring relationships with people of that culture.
- change deep-seated cultural practices that are sinful.
- develop positive cultural traits that believers should use for God's glory.
- establish Christian leadership models that will flourish in the culture.

Once again, observing and asking questions both of others (“Why do you . . .”) and to yourself (“How do they . . .”) is the key to understanding culture. Appendix 10D includes a list of sample questions on various topics to help you begin the process. As you work through those questions, pay particular attention to answers that surprise you—those that differ greatly from the way you would respond. Those kind of unexpected answers indicate areas where their culture differs significantly from your own. These areas are the most likely sources of potential conflict or miscommunication. They will require special attention on your part to understand them. When you encounter these areas, you will need to generate further questions and spend more time with the people in order to learn *what* they do and *why*.



## CONCLUSION

The process of culture study really boils down to two main things: 1) observe, and 2) ask questions. This lesson is designed to help your study by providing suggestions about: 1) *what to look for* and 2) *what questions to ask*. As we grow in understanding of the way a particular culture works, we can identify the underlying worldview (like a skeleton) that must be conformed to biblical truth.

Studying culture is challenging because there are so many variations and levels. Furthermore, it requires that we temporarily relinquish our goal of teaching and become learners. This seems like a demotion and requires a great deal of humility and patience, especially when we are eager to begin sharing the Gospel message. This preparation will allow us to accomplish more than if we rush into ministry, however. A proverb says, “If you have one tree to cut, just begin. But if you have many trees to cut, sharpen your ax first.” Far too many well-meaning cross-cultural church planters try to accomplish great things with dull axes.

## QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION, REVIEW AND APPLICATION

- What different levels of culture are apparent in your ministry location? What different geographic, religious, political, ethnic, or other differences are common?
- What “environmental” (history, climate, geography, etc.) factors appear to have significantly shaped the culture where you minister?
- If Jesus had been born into your ministry culture and lived there for thirty years instead of in Israel, what do you think His righteous life there would have looked like? How would His lifestyle have differed from the average person in that culture? How would it have been the same?
- Which of the cultural dimensions is the most helpful to you in understanding yourself?
- Which of the cultural dimensions is the most helpful to you in understanding your ministry culture?

## ACTION PLAN

- Learn about your own culture. Write down the cultural dimensions in the appendices of this lesson and note where your own attitudes fall on each trait. Ask a few other people from your culture to do the same. Write a short paragraph description of your culture that explains it to someone else.
- Learn about the culture where you minister. Write down the cultural dimensions in the appendices of this lesson and ask several people from that culture to note where their attitudes would fall on each trait. Write a short paragraph description of their culture.
- Compare your culture to the culture where you minister. Compare the descriptions you prepared above. Identify and list the traits with the greatest difference. Then think about the ways that those cultural differences could lead to friction in ministry and suggest ideas to lessen any possible miscommunication.

## SOURCES

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- Hofstede, Geert. *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill, 1997.



# Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions [2]

## DESCRIBING CULTURES

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### INTRODUCTION

The emphasis of Hofstede's study is on how cultural differences affect business relationships, but it has significant application to many other areas, including cross-cultural church planting. This appendix provides a summary of each of the cultural dimensions that Hofstede identified as well as the sample scores of a few countries for each dimension. More importantly, this section explains briefly how each dimension relates to church planting.

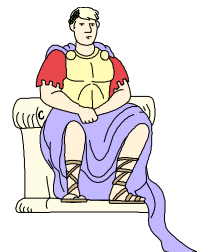
### I. POWER DISTANCE

Power distance refers to the social distance between people who are more powerful and those that are less powerful. That is, is it expected that the more powerful will have greater respect, wealth, opportunities, comfort, etc.? Or are people within the culture relatively equal to one another? In a high power distance culture, leaders expect special treatment and are not accountable to people of lower status. A less powerful person would be uncomfortable speaking freely with them. In a high power distance culture, this separation would be considered normal and good, whereas in a low power distance culture the inequality would be unacceptable.

**Key Issue: How does the culture view inequality?**

Sample power distance scores:

- Malaysia (104) – very large power distance
- West Africa (77) – moderately large power distance
- Spain (57) – moderately low power distance
- Austria (11) – very small power distance



Power distance especially relates to leadership, both in the wider culture and within the church. In a high power distance culture, church leaders would normally be held in very high esteem. Their opinions and decisions would be accepted with little debate. In low power distance cultures, by contrast, everyone's opinion would be relatively equal and leaders would be treated more like the other members of the congregation. In each case, visitors, outsiders, and new converts would all expect leaders to be treated in this way.

Even in the early evangelism stages of church planting, understanding power distance is important. In a high power distance culture, unsaved community leaders must be treated with extra respect and may need to be the first people approached in order to gain an audience for the Gospel. Their blessing on or resistance to the church plant will have a great affect. Also, there will probably be a greater separation of different classes of people. This may make it difficult to bring them together into one congregation and have them truly accept one another as equals before the Lord. Furthermore, the social class of the church planter may affect the people that he is able to attract to the new church.

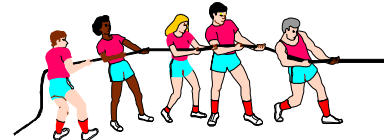
## II. INDIVIDUALISM

This dimension ranks how strongly people of a particular culture see themselves as individuals rather than as part of a group. In an individualistic culture, people tend to focus on their own needs and also expect to solve problems on their own. In collective cultures, people will make personal sacrifices for the benefit of the group and they expect that the group will also help them when they have needs.

**Key Issue: Is the individual more or less important than the group?**

Sample individualism scores:

- USA (91) – extremely individualistic
- Germany (67) – moderately individualistic
- Turkey (37) – moderately collective
- Guatemala (6) – extremely collective



The degree of individualism in a culture greatly affects decision making. Individualistic cultures will focus on decisions that are best for themselves and their own needs and circumstances. Collective cultures will be much more concerned about the effects of their choices on the larger group such as their extended family, coworkers, community, etc. Similarly, people in individualistic cultures will tend to emphasize personal time whereas people in collective cultures will desire to spend time with family and other groups to which they belong.

Individualism greatly affects church planting and church life. People in individualistic cultures will likely be won individually and will respond to a Gospel message that stresses their personal salvation and personal blessing. Once saved, they typically focus on their personal spiritual life. They tend to be less committed to the local church and to the needs of others both inside and outside the church.

People in collective cultures will often be converted in groups, weighing the effect that their decision will have on family, friends and community. They will be more attentive to Gospel presentations that stress becoming part of the family of God and being brothers and sisters in Christ. Once saved, they tend to emphasize the “one another” commands of Scripture, corporate worship, body life, and working together to meet the needs of the congregation and of unbelievers who are part of their social group.

## III. MASCULINITY

Hofstede's research found that women in most cultures tended to be modest, caring and nurturing. The roles of men, however, varied widely. In some cultures, males typically shared the nurturing values of the women. These cultures were labeled “feminine.” In other cultures, men tended to be much more assertive and competitive than the women. These cultures were labeled “masculine.” The masculinity dimension measures how a particular culture compares to these extremes.

**Key Issue: Are men nurturing or assertive and competitive?**

Sample masculinity scores:

- Japan (95) – extremely masculine
- Philippines (64) – moderately masculine
- Thailand (34) – moderately feminine
- Sweden (5) – extremely feminine





In masculine cultures the males are very concerned with their status, which is usually attained by tasks that they have accomplished in competition with other men. They can be very forceful in defending and promoting their own views and positions. Also, the greater difference between the values of men and women in masculine cultures can lead to more friction and misunderstanding between them. In feminine cultures, by contrast, the values of men and women are more similar. Men in those cultures are more concerned about relationships than status, and they are more interested in people than in completing tasks.

Believers in masculine cultures will typically be bold in their witness to unbelievers and very focused on completing the Great Commission and completing other spiritual “tasks.” However, their competitiveness can lead to disagreements between them over their methods and individual roles in the process. Furthermore, there is a danger of hurt feelings and damaged relationships with other men and women. Church planters in this context will be expected to lead strongly, but must teach the believers to care for one another.

Christians in feminine cultures will be much more likely to get along well. They will emphasize caring for one another, building up one another, and meeting needs. However, they may not take the Great Commission seriously enough, preferring to build up the existing local congregation rather than reach the lost. Church planters in this context will be judged on their relationships and how well they care for others. However, they must diligently promote the vision to reach the lost for Christ.

#### IV. UNCERTAINTY AVOIDANCE

This dimension measures how uncomfortable a culture is with uncertainty. High uncertainty avoidance cultures are so averse to change and ambiguity that they develop lots of rules and systems in an attempt to control every event and minimize the unknown. Low uncertainty avoidance cultures, by contrast, would rather enact fewer laws and rules and allow things to take their natural course.

**Key Issue: How scary are things that are different and unfamiliar?**

Sample uncertainty avoidance scores:

- Greece (112) – extreme aversion to uncertainty
- Brazil (76) – moderate aversion to uncertainty
- Indonesia (48) – moderate tolerance of uncertainty
- Singapore (8) – extreme tolerance of uncertainty



The most important factor associated with high uncertainty avoidance cultures is their *attempt to limit the unexpected through rules*. These cultures find comfort in having a rule or law for every situation, whereas a low uncertainty avoidance culture would find so many rules suffocating. Essentially, high uncertainty avoidance cultures would trade freedom for order, while low uncertainty avoidance cultures would endure considerable social upheaval in order to maintain freedom.

Church planting in high uncertainty avoidance cultures will typically face immediate resistance because the Gospel represents change from established religious traditions. In these cultures, anything new is bad. Church planting will probably take significant time and effort to show how the Gospel can cause enough positive change for the people that it will be worth the change. Once planted, a new church in this setting will battle with legalism and acceptance of new converts. However, if it is planted well, the new church will likely remain faithful to the truth and not be easily swayed by any new unbiblical teaching.

Church planting in low uncertainty avoidance cultures will probably meet with significant success. People in these cultures will most likely be interested in the newness of the teaching and respond positively, like the Athenians (Ac 17:21). The potential problem with church planting in this kind of culture is that once the novelty has worn off, they will move on to something else. They are less likely to remain committed to the foundational truths of the Gospel. Furthermore, since rules are not very important, they may tend to be syncretistic—trying to fit Christianity into their former beliefs rather than truly converting to the Gospel.

## V. VIRTUE

This dimension highlights a major cultural difference between the East and the West. This is perhaps the most confusing of Hofstede's dimensions because it is variously labeled as "Virtue vs. Truth" and as "Long-term vs. Short-term orientation." These would seem to be two different dimensions—and indeed some researchers separate them—but in Hofstede's original research they are combined into one dimension. Both aspects are very relevant to church planting and church ministry, however, and so we will describe their application separately.

**Key Issue: Is what you *believe* or what you *do* more important?**

Sample virtue scores:

- China (118) – very strongly oriented toward virtue
- South Korea ( 75) – moderately oriented toward virtue
- Australia (31) – moderately orientated toward truth
- Pakistan (0) – very strongly oriented toward truth



### A. Truth vs. Virtue

High truth cultures are mainly concerned with what people *believe*, whereas high virtue cultures emphasize how people *behave*. In other words, high truth cultures value knowledge, facts, education and understanding. This does not mean that they ignore behavior, but that they think increased knowledge is the path to better living. High virtue cultures value experience, wisdom and tradition. Likewise, they do not despise knowledge, but believe that wise living is the path to gaining true knowledge. Eastern cultures tend to focus on virtue, and therefore highly value tradition—fiercely so in some situations. Western cultures tend to emphasize truth, and therefore value academic education.

Church planters working among high virtue cultures will especially need to model godly living and personal holiness in order to gain a hearing for the Gospel. Those cultures will not be impressed with what we know or our education and training unless they see that the Gospel has transformed our lives in ways that they value. They must be convicted by our changed lives. Once the church is established, the members will likely continue to focus on godly living, but may neglect sound doctrine. Doctrine will only seem important to them if they see how it affects the way they live. Special care will be needed to prevent the introduction of error into the body. Church forms in this setting should be chosen carefully, as they will quickly become traditions and continue for generations.

Church planting among high truth cultures can expect to be challenged about biblical doctrines and beliefs. They will need to be able to defend the truth of the Gospel. Once the church is established, teaching will be valued, but it may not lead to true life-change. Special effort must be given to explaining how truths apply to daily life. They need to heed James's warning that belief that does not result in works is not really a saving faith (Jas 2:14-20).

It is important for Christians to remember that neither of these positions is completely correct or entirely wrong. Both virtue and truth are equally important. We must believe the right truth about Christ's sacrifice in order to be saved, but we cannot please God unless we allow the Gospel to transform the way we live. We must balance truth and virtue. In every culture we must keep the one that is valued while teaching the importance of the one that is lacking.

## **B. Long-term Orientation vs. Short-term Orientation**

Cultures with high virtue scores also tend to have a long-term orientation. They value continuity, thrift and perseverance. In other words, they desire to maintain and promote that which has a long track record of being useful. They continue to do what they have always done and found beneficial. Eastern countries tend to be more long-term in their thinking, possibly because they typically have longer continuous histories to preserve.

Cultures with high truth scores tend to have a short-term orientation. They are mainly concerned with what they should do in the present time. When they follow tradition, they do so because they think it is helpful now more than because of a conviction that the past must be maintained. They will abandon a tradition if they believe a newer method or teaching is more helpful for their situation. Western countries tend to have a short-term orientation.

Church planting among a long-term culture will probably proceed slowly. Initially, the Gospel may seem disrespectful to past traditions. However, once established, the church will probably persevere for generations. These cultures will understand a patient approach that emphasizes discipling new believers thoroughly before sending them into ministry. If compared to the story of the race between the tortoise and the hare, long-term cultures would be represented by the tortoise—slow and steady.

Church planting among short-term cultures may move at a faster pace, but may not be as long-lasting. They will emphasize evangelism and rapid growth, but may struggle with the demands of discipleship and training. There may be a rush to build the church rapidly before firmly establishing the foundation. On the positive side, they will be more open to changing poor methods and forms for better, more effective ones. If compared to the story of the race between the tortoise and the hare, short-term cultures would be represented by the hare—starting quickly but potentially finishing poorly.

## **SUMMARY**

Each of the cultural dimensions in this appendix has both strengths and weaknesses. Wise church planters will be aware of these and approach a new culture carefully so that they reinforce the traits that are godly and also begin to build up the biblical traits that are lacking. The task is complicated by the fact that these dimensions occur in so many combinations in the various cultures that we may encounter. The information in this appendix is only a small taste of the helpful descriptions of culture that are available to us. Every cross-cultural church planter is encouraged to continue to study and learn about how cultures function in order to better plant churches that fit the local context and thrive there.

### *Note:*

For church planters with Internet access, much more information about various cultures is available online at <http://www.geert-hofstede.com/>.



## Other Cultural Traits [2]

### THE MANY FACETS OF CULTURE

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#### INTRODUCTION

Since Geert Hofstede published his cultural study, many other researchers have identified other cultural dimensions. The categories below are examples of some of these other traits as described in two books about culture.

#### I. WAVES OF CULTURE

Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner identified several cultural traits that influence business relationships. Their categories are also helpful for understanding cross-cultural ministry relationships.

##### A. Universalism vs. Particularism

This category is similar to Hofstede's uncertainty avoidance, but with a few changes. Universalists make decisions based on rules, principles and contracts. They are not especially concerned with "extenuating circumstances" and do not feel the need to judge every situation on its own merits if there is a general rule that can be applied. Particularists, however, are more inclined to evaluate every decision as if it were unique and an exception to the general rules. To put it another way, universalists look for a reason why any issue is like all the rest and deserves no special consideration. Particularists look for a reason why every issue is different from all the others and requires unique handling.

Believers from universalist cultures will take biblical obligations and commands very seriously. They will be moved by studying the didactic teaching of Scripture. However, they need to be careful not to become legalistic and assume that their relationship with God depends only on their obedience. Christians from particularist cultures will be more inclined toward the narratives of the Bible. They love to learn about the unique ways that God has dealt with individuals throughout history. However, they can be so happy to just have a relationship with God that they neglect to obey Him by carrying out the works He has asked them to do.

##### B. Neutral vs. Emotional

This category describes how expressive people in a particular culture tend to be. This includes how easily they display emotion, how loud they talk, how vivid their body language is and how much emotion influences decision-making. For instance, raising one's voice might be a good way of showing emphasis in an emotional culture, but demonstrate a loss of control in a neutral culture.

This category is especially important for cross-cultural church planters to learn and understand. Displaying the wrong level of emotion can sabotage any chance of people listening to our presentation of the Gospel. If we are too calm in an emotional culture, we may come across as dispassionate and uninteresting. If we are too emotional in a neutral culture, they may think we are obnoxious and even unstable. Either mistake will severely limit our ministry.

##### C. Specific vs. Diffuse

This category describes the degree to which people in a particular culture tend to get involved with other people. In a specific culture, the various aspects of a person's life (work, social,

family, personal, etc.) tend to be separate from one another. For instance, in a specific culture, it is possible to have a close relationship with a person at work, but know little about their family or personal life. It is possible to “know” many people and yet not really know much about their lives in general. In a diffuse culture, the various aspects of a person’s life tend to be tightly connected. In that culture, if you know a person, you know about most of the areas of his life. People would “know” fewer people, but would have a much deeper knowledge of those individuals.

In church planting, it is important to develop close relationships with those to whom we minister. It is easy to quickly build shallow relationships with many people in a specific culture, and yet not really understand who they are. It is much more difficult to become close enough to share spiritual counsel or challenge them to true life change. Relationships take more time to develop in diffuse cultures, but they go to deeper levels. However, such close relationships can be very demanding and time-consuming. Furthermore, people in diffuse cultures may be jealous of time we spend with other believers or with the lost.

#### **D. Ascribed vs. Achieved Status**

This category explains how people are accorded status in a culture. Ascribed status results from *who people are*, but achieved status results from *what they do*. That is, ascribed status is not earned, but achieved status is. A person might be ascribed a particular status because of his or her parents, race, age, gender or social connections. By contrast, a person might achieve status through education, hard work, experience, etc.

A church planter entering another culture needs to have a certain amount of status with the people or they will not listen to his message. Knowing how that group accords status will enable the church planter to focus on the things that would most likely result in a hearing for the Gospel. For instance, in rural Russia, theological education is not valued nearly as much as age and experience. Therefore, a young church planter who has worked diligently to *achieve* status by going to Bible school may not be taken seriously by the people who *ascribe* status based on age. At the same time, the young church planter may have trouble granting the respect that older, experienced local people feel they deserve.

#### **E. Time Orientation**

The way people in different cultures view time is very complex, and there are many different ways to compare their approaches. Three of the major ways of looking at time are as follows:

##### *3. Relative importance of the past, present and future*

Some cultures stress the past. They make decisions based on what has been done and what continues past values and directions. Other cultures live in the present. The most important thing is what works or is beneficial right now. Finally, there are cultures that focus mainly on the future. They are willing to change from the past and to sacrifice in the present in order to secure better future outcomes. And of course, it is possible to find a group of people with almost any combination of these values.

##### *4. Connection between the past, present and future*

Some cultures believe that events of the past and present have little bearing on the future. They view them as distinct, separate occurrences, maybe because they think events happen by chance or in random fashion. Other cultures see them as connected—with the past and present shaping the future. These people tend to believe strongly in the idea of “cause and effect”—every event leading to a logical result. Either of these approaches to time influences how they perceive God’s role in controlling and guiding events of life.

##### *5. Sequential or cyclical nature of time*

The majority of cultures view time as sequential, or linear. That is, it proceeds from a starting point toward an end point. The Bible presents time as sequential—moving through the events of history in order. However, there is an important difference from the

secular view of linear time. Scripture teaches that God (and therefore, time) existed in eternity past and will continue until eternity future. We know time will still exist in heaven because the tree of life bears fruit “every month” (Rev 22:2), but it will continue without end “forever and ever” (Rev 22:5).

There are some cultures who view time as cyclical—having no beginning or end, but, repeating endlessly instead. People who believe in reincarnation typically understand time this way. This approach to time causes them to be less concerned about the distant future or an eternal destiny. Death is not a final event, but something to be repeated endlessly. Seasons repeat, but the Bible teaches that life is marching steadily to a final judgment.

## F. Relating to Nature

This category describes whether people think they can significantly change their environment, or if they must simply accept things the way they are. The first group believes they have some control over events that happen and that they should strive to make their surroundings better. They tend to be more confident—some would say overconfident. The second group thinks the things that happen to them, and that will happen, are mostly out of their control. They believe it would be futile to try to change things—it is much better to spend their energy finding ways to adapt *themselves* to the inevitable instead of fixing their surroundings.

There are many ways that these two views of nature can affect church planting. People who believe they have control may have difficulty accepting the Gospel message that there is nothing we can do about our sin except trust Christ’s sacrifice by faith. They tend to want to work out their own solution rather than believe in His finished work. By contrast, people who believe they are at the mercy of nature tend to use that helplessness as an excuse for their sin. They may have difficulty admitting that they are guilty before the Lord, hoping instead to plead that sin is not their fault. Adam and Eve tried this approach (Ge 3:12-13).

## II. MINISTERING CROSS-CULTURALLY

Lingenfelter and Mayers described six cultural dimensions. Status vs. achievement has already been discussed above. The other five dimensions, while similar to Hofstede’s categories, are presented somewhat differently and are listed below as helpful ways of looking at culture.

### A. Event vs. Time Orientation

People of some cultures are more concerned with *what is happening* (event orientation) while others focus on *when it is happening* (time orientation). For the church planter, this is not so much a spiritual issue as it is a potential pitfall in relationships. People with an event orientation will focus on the present activity in which they are engaged and pay little attention to the clock, deadlines, or the next event. The advantage of this approach is that they are fully committed to what they are doing at the moment—they are “all there.” The weakness is that they will often fail to allocate their time well enough to complete vital tasks or assignments. They may spend so much time on less important events that they simply run out of time to do the most important ones.

People with a time orientation are more likely to complete all of their assigned tasks. By that measure, they are successful. However, their weakness is that they may become such slaves to the tasks and the clock that they are unable to adapt their schedule to accommodate the needs of people. Some of the most effective ministry occurs in “teachable moments”—those times when spontaneous or unscheduled needs, conversations, and events happen. However, a believer with a time orientation may find it difficult to take advantage of these occasions.

### B. Person vs. Task Orientation

Some people consider personal relationships to be the greatest goal, and others are more concerned about completing tasks. In general, men tend to be more task-oriented and women more people-oriented. Different cultures are also spread across this scale. Cross-cultural conflict is very possible when completing a task risks damaging a relationship. For instance,

an incompetent worker might threaten completion of a project. A people-oriented culture would try to keep the relationship with the worker even at the expense of the project. A task-oriented culture would fire the worker, damaging the relationship, in order to protect the task.

It can be very difficult to apply this cultural dimension to the Christian life. A quick, shallow observation might indicate that people are always more important than tasks. However, deeper evaluation determines how God fits into this picture. We should not be concerned about only tasks or people, but about the priority of serving the Lord. A more theologically-accurate view would be that God is the most important thing in the life of the believer and has committed to us the *task* of reconciling *people* to Him and making them into His disciples (2Co 5:19; Mt 28:18-20).

### C. Holistic vs. Dichotomistic Thinking

Holistic thinkers tend to view things as complete entities. They are not concerned about how things fit together or the connection between the individual pieces. Holistic thinkers value emotions, images, and synthetic thought. Dichotomistic thinkers tend to focus on the relationship between the parts. They value explanations, logic, and analytical thought. If they were looking at a group of trees, holistic thinkers would focus on the forest and dichotomistic thinkers would mainly notice the individual trees.

Christians from holistic cultures find it easier to see the overall themes of Scripture such as God's love, redemption, sin, etc. They tend to accept the Bible as true without worrying about whether they understand every detail. However, this may limit their ability to defend the faith from cults and other non-biblical teaching. Furthermore, they are less discerning about whether or not cultural practices and behavior are really compatible with the Christian life. Dichotomistic believers will have a better grasp of the details of theology, but may neglect to let their knowledge change their lives into the image of Christ.

### D. Crisis vs. Non-crisis Orientation

People with a crisis orientation tend to anticipate problems before they happen. They value planning, organization, clear procedures and expert advice to deal with actual and potential concerns. Their approach is *proactive*. Noncrisis-oriented people prefer to wait until a problem happens before they deal with it. They value addressing every situation as a unique occurrence and handling it in whatever way seems best at that time. Their approach would be *reactive*.

Believers from these two groups differ in their approaches in several areas. For instance, crisis-oriented Christians emphasize advance training of believers and church workers to be prepared to deal with any need. Their pastors tend to complete formal education before beginning their ministry. They like to have clearly-stated doctrine and specific plans for church growth and ministry. By contrast, non-crisis-oriented believers would prefer that Christians learn to deal with every situation as it occurs. They value older pastors with real-life experience and "on the job" training. They emphasize holy living more than knowledge, and are more open to moment-by-moment leading of the Holy Spirit in all church activities.

### E. Conceal vs. Expose Vulnerability

People of different cultures vary widely as to the whether revealing weaknesses and shortcomings is a good thing or a bad thing. Some will go to great lengths to conceal any failure or problem in themselves or in others. These cultures avoid situations where they are not confident that they can excel. They also tend not to be very open about their personal lives. Other people are not worried about vulnerability. They see criticism and failure as a natural part of the learning process. They are more open about their personal lives and willing to risk undertaking new activities.

When people conceal vulnerability, it can be very difficult for them to repent—the only way to salvation. They would rather excuse or hide their behavior than confess their sin to God or men. Even as believers, they will struggle with confessing their sin (Jas 5:16; 1Jn 1:9). It will

also be difficult for them to trust other believers enough to develop close relationships within the body of Christ. By contrast, people who are willing to expose their vulnerability will struggle with taking their sin seriously enough—they will admit it, but may believe it is not a big deal since everyone falls short. They may consider holy living to be out of reach and not worth the struggle.

The traits in this appendix are starting points for culture study—not an exhaustive list. The ways that we can look at culture are endless. Our goal should be to continue to ask more questions and not to give up on careful observation.

## SOURCES

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- Trompenaars, Fons and Charles Hampden-Turner. *Riding the Waves of Culture: Understanding Cultural Diversity in Business*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. London: Nicholas Brealey Publishing, 1997.





## Grid/Group [2]

### PLOTTING CULTURE ON A GRID

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#### INTRODUCTION

The Grid and Group method of classifying cultures was developed by sociologist Mary Douglas and has been used by many people to explain cultural traits. She defined grid and group as follows:

**Grid** – refers to the degree to which externally-imposed rules and regulations guide the behavior and decision-making of people.

**Group** – refers to how strongly people are included into a social group and to what extent their relationships within that group influence their behavior.

Douglas proposed that these two categories could be graphed on perpendicular axes, resulting in four quadrants that describe four major kinds of cultures. These four quadrants are:

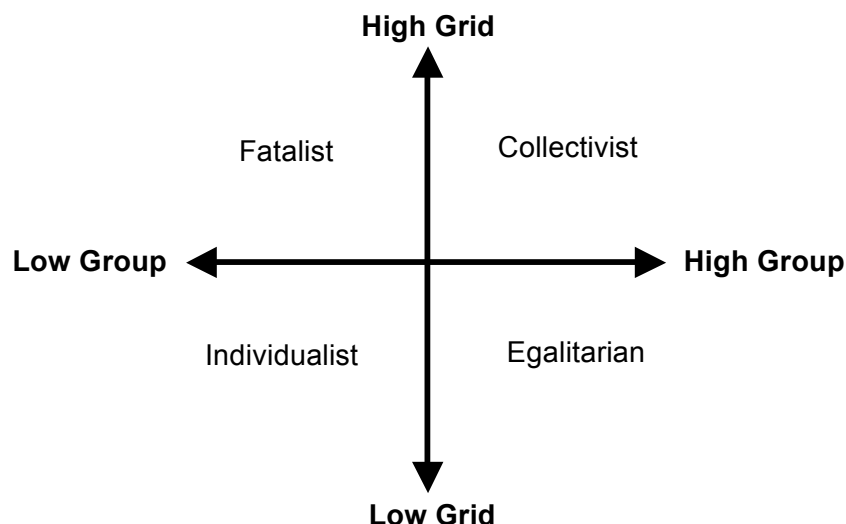
**Fatalist (low group/high grid)** – fatalists are controlled from without, but have little control over others. They are alone and vulnerable to outside rules.

**Individualist (low group/low grid)** – individualists do not experience significant outside control from either rules or a group. They essentially do whatever they please.

**Collectivist (high group/high grid)** – collectivists are controlled by rules and by the group. They have little individual freedom.

**Egalitarian (high group/low grid)** – egalitarians are not bound by rules, but only by the values of the group. They are technically free, but expected to conform to the group.

These four types of culture are arranged on the Grid and Group graph as shown below:



This system is somewhat more complex and academic than other systems, but can be helpful for church planters who make the effort to understand it. The following observations are examples of how Grid and Group categories might explain why people react to the Gospel or fit into a new church differently.

**Fatalists** – fatalists will not feel group pressure to resist conversion to Christianity, but they will struggle with the idea of being saved by grace rather than works (obeying the rules). Some will find the emphasis on freedom refreshing, but most will be unsure how to live in that kind of environment. Furthermore, after conversion, they may not feel it is necessary to form close bonds with other believers and to disciple one another.

**Individualists** – individualists are used to looking out for their own interests and will want to know how they will personally benefit by converting to Christianity. On the positive side, group pressure and the bonds of their previous religious culture will do little to prevent them from accepting Christ. However, like the fatalists above, they will not easily value body life or discipling one another. Furthermore, they may continue to see God as someone to meet their needs rather than their Lord.

**Collectivists** – collectivists will find it difficult to convert to Christianity since both the group and their outside system of authority will resist that change. Once saved, they may continue to struggle with the idea of grace and freedom in Christ. They will tend to replace former non-Christian rules with Christian legalism. They also may find it difficult to develop their individual God-given abilities and talents, since they will still see themselves as part of the group instead of as individuals.

**Egalitarians** – egalitarians will be highly vulnerable to peer pressure both before and after conversion to Christianity. Even as believers, they will tend to organize the congregation in ways that fit the nature or the group rather than looking to Scripture as the authority for the church. They will struggle with theological and biblical absolutes as opposed to what is expedient or desirable for the congregation and its social harmony.

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- Douglas, Mary. *Natural Symbols*. New York: Penguin Books/Pelican, 1973.



# Practical Culture Questions

## [2]

### THINGS TO ASK AND OBSERVE

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#### INTRODUCTION

The best way to study a new culture is to observe and ask many, many questions about *what* they do and *why* they do it. The purpose of this appendix is to list sample questions that may help you understand how people in another culture view and relate to the basic issues of life.

##### ***God:***

- How many Gods or gods (deities) are there? Are they equal or unequal?
- If there is more than one god, how do they relate to one another?
- How do the deities relate to or interact with people? What do they require from people?
- How do the deities relate to one another?
- What attributes (power, knowledge, lifespan, character, etc.) do the deities have?
- What limitations do the deities have?
- In what form do the deities exist or appear?
- How did the deities come into being?
- How do the people know about the deities?
- Is the understanding of deities uniform throughout the culture?

##### ***Spirits:***

- Do the people believe that spirits exist?
- What is the moral state of the spirits? Good? Bad? Mixed?
- Where do people think spirits come from?
- What powers or other attributes do the spirits have?
- What limitations do the spirits have?
- Are all spirits equal in power or other attributes?
- How do the spirits relate to the deities?
- How do the spirits relate to people? What do the spirits expect of them?
- How do spirits relate to each other?
- Is the understanding of spirits uniform throughout the culture?

##### ***Family:***

- Who is included in the family? How many people, generations, etc.?
- How important is the family in the life of the society?
- What roles and responsibilities are families expected to fulfill in society?
- What roles and responsibilities does each family member have within the family?

- How is authority and power distributed to the various family members?
- How are family responsibilities taught or passed on to younger generations?
- How do family relationships compare in intensity to outside relationships such as friends, coworkers, etc.?
- How quickly and by what process are new family members accepted via marriage?
- To what degree do family members share possessions with one another?
- How intimately do family members share personal thoughts and information with one another?
- How do age or generational issues affect relationships within the family?
- How are family relationships different now than in the past, and in what ways do they appear to be changing towards the future?

***Men:***

- How do the roles of men in society differ from those of women? What unique roles do men have?
- At what age does a boy become a “man?” By what process?
- How do men relate to other men in public? In private?
- How do men relate to women in public?
- How do men relate to children in public?
- What would people in the culture say is a description of the ideal man?
- What behavior is considered inappropriate for men?
- What accomplishments are most important to men?
- How do men handle and express emotion?
- What makes men happy? Excited? Joyful?
- What do men fear? What are they afraid of? What are they worried will happen?
- Where and how do men spend their non-working time?
- Where and how do men socialize? Relax?

***Husbands:***

- By what process does a man gain a wife? At what age? At what expense?
- What are the primary responsibilities of a husband?
- How would people in the culture describe the “ideal” husband?
- How would people in the culture describe a “bad” husband?
- What does a husband expect from his wife in a marriage?
- How does the marriage compare to other priorities in a husband’s life?
- What kind of relationship does a man have with his wife in public? In private?
- How does a husband’s emotional and social intimacy with his wife compare to the closeness that he has with his male friends?
- What is the husband’s relationship to his wife’s family?
- Can a husband divorce a wife? Under what conditions?

**Fathers:**

- What are the primary responsibilities that a father has with respect to his children?
- What does a father expect from his children?
- What is the father's role in disciplining children?
- How involved is the father in the education of his children?
- How much time does a father spend with his children? Doing what? Where?
- Does a father treat his sons differently than his daughters? How? Why?
- What kind of future do fathers desire for their sons? For their daughters?
- What are the biggest fears that fathers have for their children?

**Women:**

- How do the roles of women in society differ from those of men? What unique roles do women have?
- How do women relate to one another in public? In private?
- How do women relate to men in public?
- What would people in the culture say describes the ideal woman?
- What behavior is considered inappropriate for women?
- What accomplishments are most important for women?
- How important is it for a woman to be married? To have children?
- What makes women happy? Excited? Joyful?
- What do women fear? What are they afraid of? What are they worried will happen?
- Where and how do women socialize? Relax?

**Wives:**

- By what process, and at what age, does a woman become a wife?
- What are the primary responsibilities of a wife?
- What does a wife expect from her husband in a marriage?
- In what ways does society view a wife differently than an adult single woman?
- How would people in the culture describe the "ideal" wife?
- How would people in the culture describe a "bad" wife?
- What kinds of things are most important to wives in a marriage?
- What kind of relationship does a woman have with her husband in public? In private?
- How does a wife's emotional and social intimacy with her husband compare to the closeness that she has with her female friends?
- What is the wife's relationship to her husband's family?
- Can a wife divorce a husband? Under what conditions?

**Mothers:**

- What are the primary responsibilities that a mother has with respect to her children?
- What does a mother expect from her children?

- What is the mother's role in disciplining her children?
- What is the mother's role in the education of her children?
- Are mothers accorded any special status by society in general?
- Are mothers expected to make important contributions to society? What kind?
- Does it make a difference whether a mother has sons or daughters? Does the number of children make a difference in her status or the way she is treated?
- What do mothers desire for their sons? For their daughters?
- What do mothers fear for their children? What worries them?

***Children:***

- How important are children in a marriage?
- How many children would be the "ideal" number? Why?
- How is a son's relationship with his father different than with his mother?
- How is a daughter's relationship with her father different than with her mother?
- What are the responsibilities of adult children with respect to their parents?
- What degree of authority or influence do parents have over adult children?
- How does marriage change the way parents relate to their sons? To their daughters?
- How are children expected to interact with their parents? With other adults?
- Why are children important or valued?
- To what degree are parents willing to sacrifice for the well-being of their children?
- Who is responsible for the spiritual education of children?

***Grandparents:***

- What level of respect or authority is given to grandparents?
- What roles do grandparents fulfill within the extended family?
- Is there a difference in the way the husband's parents are valued and treated compared to the wife's parents?
- What role and responsibilities do grandparents have in the rearing of their grandchildren?
- Who is expected to provide for the care and support of grandparents? To what degree?

***Extended Family:***

- How extensive is the group that is considered to be "family?"
- What roles and responsibilities do aunts and uncles have? Cousins? Other extended family members?
- To what degree are possessions and finances shared within the extended family?
- In what geographical proximity do extended families tend to live?
- How often, to what degree, and on what occasions do extended families meet together?
- How do extended families treat members that are immoral, unethical, or unproductive?
- How much authority is granted to extended family members? In what situations?

**Neighbors:**

- Who is considered a “neighbor?” How far apart do neighbors live?
- How many people would typically be considered “neighbors?”
- How much do neighbors share possessions with one another? How much do they help each other with tasks?
- How would people in the culture describe an “ideal” neighbor?
- How would people in the culture describe a “bad” neighbor?
- How strongly would the opinions of neighbors influence a person’s decision-making?
- At what level of need would someone expect help from a neighbor? A minor problem? A significant problem? A crisis?

**Strangers:**

- How positive or negative is the typical initial reaction to a stranger? Are they assumed to be good or bad people?
- What might a person fear from a stranger? In what setting?
- How much does a person’s attitude toward strangers change if there are racial or substantial cultural differences?
- How much social interaction does a person typically have with a stranger? In what situations?
- How much hospitality is commonly extended to a stranger?
- At what level of need would someone expect help from a stranger? A minor problem? A significant problem? A crisis?
- How much interaction do people have to have with another individual to consider them to be an “acquaintance” rather than a “stranger?” A “friend?”
- How long does it typically take for a “stranger” to become an “acquaintance” or a “friend?”

**Work:**

- What kind of work do most people do?
- What is the typical form and amount of payment given for work?
- Does the typical worker receive consistent income throughout the year, or is it seasonal?
- Are there other rewards or reasons people in the culture work besides payment?
- How does the kind of work a person does affect his or her status in the culture?
- How do people in the culture view different kinds of work? Do they enjoy it and take pride in it? Consider it beneath them? Hate it? Tolerate it?
- How easy is it for people to move up to more desirable work? On what basis does this happen?
- What types of non-employment work (unpaid) do people tend to engage in? Why?
- What portion of the typical person’s time is consumed by work, as opposed to leisure and other activities?
- What kind of work do parents desire for their children to do when they grow up? Why?

**Money:**

- Is more than one form of money used in the culture? What types? Why?
- How much money does the typical person have?
- How stable is the money used in the culture? Is it a safe way to save for future needs?
- How much disparity is there in the financial levels of people in the culture?
- Is money the main source of exchange for goods and services, or is there something else that is bartered, traded, or exchanged?
- How much money does the typical person in the culture think would be “enough” to live in a reasonably comfortable style? What would that lifestyle look like?
- How closely do people equate having money with having happiness or success?
- Do people in the culture agree that “the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil?”
- To what degree is money considered a source of power or status in the culture?
- Is money loaned? On what basis? What is the typical repayment time and amount?
- How do people view people who have money and loan it? People who don’t loan?

**Rules and Laws:**

- Are rules and laws viewed positively as helpful for society, or seen negatively as a hindrance to freedom?
- Do people in the culture believe individual freedom is a good thing, or a danger?
- Do people consider it normal or OK to break “minor” rules, or is such behavior generally thought to be bad for society?
- How conscientious is the typical person about observing every rule and law?
- Who has the authority to make laws and rules for society? How much input do common people have in the process?
- Are rules and laws with a long history considered “outdated” or “proven and trustworthy?” How frequently do laws and rules change?
- How harsh are the penalties for breaking laws? Who administers the punishment?
- Is the society mainly guided by laws instituted by the government or by rules imposed by other social or religious groups?

**Secular Authorities:**

- How positively or negatively do people tend to view the secular authorities in the culture?
- How do the secular authorities gain their positions? How are they changed or replaced?
- What kind of relationship do secular authorities have with religious authorities?
- How do the secular authorities view Christianity? Why? What caused this view?
- What kind of contact do typical people have with the secular authorities? Which authorities? On what basis? How often?
- What attitude do people in the culture typically have toward the secular authorities? Fear? Love? Respect? Distain? Gratefulness? Ambivalence? Something else?
- To what degree are the secular authorities perceived of as existing to help the people?
- Would the typical person want their children to become part of the secular authority?



***Religious Authorities:***

- How positively or negatively do people tend to view the religious authorities in the culture?
- How important is it for a person in a position of religious authority to live a moral, holy lifestyle?
- Are people most concerned about what religious leaders know, what they do, or who they are?
- How do the religious authorities gain their positions? How are they changed or replaced?
- What kind of relationship do religious authorities have with secular authorities?
- How do the religious authorities view Christianity? Why? What caused this view?
- What kind of contact do typical people have with the religious authorities? Which authorities? On what basis? How often?
- What attitude do people in the culture typically have toward the religious authorities? Fear? Love? Respect? Distain? Gratefulness? Ambivalence? Something else?
- Is the major goal of religious authorities to maintain religious tradition or to make sure that their religious practices are relevant to modern times?

***Time:***

- Do people understand time to be progressing toward some end or continuing eternally?
- Given the choice, would people rather spend more money to save time on a task, or spend more time in order to save the money? Is time or money more important?
- Do people tend to think about the ramifications of decisions in the near future, or are they more concerned about long-term effects?
- Is it more important to begin a meeting or event at the scheduled time, or to wait until everyone is present?
- How old does someone have to be before they are considered “mature?” “Adult?” “Experienced?” “Wise?”
- How willing are people to give up a short-term gain in order to receive a larger gain in the future?
- Is patiently waiting for something considered a virtue, or is it a sign of laziness and lack of motivation?

***Possessions:***

- How much “stuff” do people typically have?
- What portion of possessions is typically used for daily living, and what portion is for leisure, status or investment?
- How freely do people lend or give away their possessions? To whom? On what basis?
- How does the amount of peoples’ possessions affect their status in the culture?
- Do most possessions typically belong to an individual or to a larger group?
- Are there any significant examples of community property in the culture? How does that work? How well does it work?
- What is the process of inheritance—passing possessions on to the next generation?
- Which possessions are most valued in the culture? Why?

**Status:**

- Who are the most “important” or respected people in the culture?
- How does a person become “important” in the culture? How do they lose status?
- Do people typically *like* people of high status in the culture? Why or why not?
- How important is it for people to try to gain status in the culture? What are they willing to sacrifice in order to obtain it for themselves or for their children?
- Who would have higher status—a poor person of great wisdom, or a rich person with little experience in life?
- Who would have a higher status—a hard worker from an obscure family, or a person of modest ability from an important family?
- Who would have a higher status—a wealthy person, or a highly educated person?
- Does personal moral character have any significant bearing on the status of a person?
- Do people of higher and lower status commonly socialize together? Are they comfortable doing so?
- Is status a major concern in choosing a marriage partner?

**Education:**

- How important do parents consider education to be for their children? How much are they willing to sacrifice in order to educate them?
- Is education equally important for boys and girls? Why or why not?
- What is the educational level of a typical person in the culture?
- Who is considered a “highly-educated” person in the culture?
- To what degree is education in the culture geared toward vocational training?
- Is the maintaining of tradition an important part of education in the culture?
- Does education in the culture emphasize learning of facts or problem-solving?
- To what degree are parents involved in the education of their children?
- Do teachers mainly motivate learning by rewarding success or by punishing failure?
- What is the role, if any, of religion in education?

**Health:**

- What do people believe causes illness? What causes healing?
- What health problems most concern people in the culture? What are they afraid of?
- Are there significant environmental factors that cause poor health?
- What is the average lifespan of adults? Of children?
- What do people in the culture do in order to try to be healthy?
- Where or to whom do people go for help when they are sick?
- Do people believe that health has a spiritual component? In what way?
- What do people in the culture think is an acceptable level of wellness?
- What percentage of a family’ annual income is spent on health-related costs?
- What is the status of medical experts or professionals?

***Death:***

- What is the most common cause of death in the culture?
- What do people in the culture think happens to a person after death?
- What attitude do people tend to have about dying? Fear? Resignation? Something else?
- What rituals surround death? What do they mean? Who performs them?
- Do people believe there is anything they can do to affect the dead after they die?
- Are friends and relatives involved in the dying process, or are they somewhat sheltered from it?
- Do people believe the spirits of the dead continue to be present among the living?
- How do people in the culture comfort people who have lost a loved one?

***Good and Evil:***

- Do people believe that good and evil exist as influences apart from us?
- Is evil personified in any way or as any particular being?
- Is good personified in any way or as any particular being?
- Do people in the culture think that men and women are basically good, bad, or neutral?
- What acts are considered especially “good” in the culture? Why?
- What do people think is the reward for being good?
- What acts are considered especially “evil” in the culture? Why?
- What do people think is the penalty for being evil?
- If the culture believes in sin, who do they think they sin against?
- Who do people think is the ultimate judge of what is good or evil, right or wrong?
- Do people in the culture think the forces of good and evil, if they exist, are equally strong, or that one is more powerful than the other?

***Nature:***

- How do people think the universe came to exist?
- Do people think there is a supernatural power, or do only natural powers exist?
- What controls and directs nature and natural events?
- Does nature have some sort of will or desire, or is it just a series of events?
- Can human beings significantly influence the course of nature, or must we simply submit to what happens to us?
- How much do people think nature affects who and what they are and become?
- What responsibility, if any, do people have to care for the environment around them?
- What is the ultimate end of the natural world?

**Note: This is just the beginning! Continue to add your own questions to the list.**



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**PART 3:**  
**CROSS-CULTURAL MINISTRY**

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# Cross-Cultural Living [3]

## BECOMING “THIRD-CULTURE”

### ☞ Lesson Purpose

The purpose of this lesson is to explain the value and process of incarnational living in cross-cultural church planting ministry.

### ☞ Main Points

- “Incarnational” ministry is far more effective than using the “foray” method.
- Both Jesus and the Apostle Paul demonstrated how to do incarnational ministry.
- Being “third-culture” people should be normal for all believers because our citizenship is in heaven.
- Truly incarnational ministry requires great personal sacrifice.

### ☞ Desired Outcomes

When the content of this lesson has been mastered, each participant should

- Understand the difference between “foray” and “incarnational” ministry.
- Identify practical steps to make their cross-cultural ministry more incarnational and effective.

## INTRODUCTION

The previous section explained some of the important differences in the worldview, behavior, and values of people from different cultures. Cross-cultural church planters must understand and appreciate these differences in order to guide the development of new churches that fit the culture and bring real life-change. It is possible, however, to have an *academic* understanding of culture and yet not use that knowledge to change how we minister to people with a different worldview.

The study of another culture will bear the most practical fruit when we use our new understanding to better fit into that culture, thereby lowering the barriers to effective communication. Living in another culture is not easy. Too many church planters take shortcuts to cross-cultural ministry rather than investing the time and effort it takes to be a living example of the Gospel.

### I. “FORAY” OR “INCARNATION”

A foundational question that every cross-cultural church planter must answer is, “How deeply do I want to get involved in this new culture?” The answer can range from “as little as possible” to “as much as possible.” We call the “as little as possible” approach the “foray” method and the “as much as possible” option the “incarnation” method. Although most church planters will not choose either of these extremes, it is helpful to understand the merits and weaknesses of each approach in order to decide on the kind of ministry you desire to have.

#### A. Foray Method

“Forays” are brief trips from a comfortable, established base into a new area. Forays have been very common in the history of missions, although the way they are accomplished has changed with modern technology and transportation.

### 6. *Mission Compounds of the Past*

In generations past, a common “foray” method was for missionaries (typically westerners) to travel to an unevangelized country and establish mission compounds. These compounds featured housing and other amenities that resembled western living more than the host country. Often, they also included medical or educational facilities that were not available locally. Therefore, the rationale for the compound was that they provided an increased level of services for the nationals as well as a standard of living for the missionaries that kept them healthy and equipped to better minister to the needs of the local people.

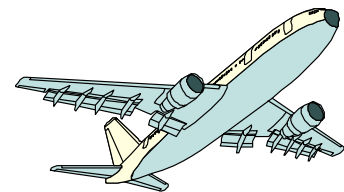
All too often, these mission compounds prevented missionaries from being deeply involved in the local culture and impacting it with the Gospel. Maintaining compound life and institutions demanded a lot of time, energy, and resources. Some missionaries did indeed go out into the surrounding culture, but not for long enough times to learn about the local people and to model Christian living to them. Too often, the Great Commission mandate to “go” and make disciples of the nations became an invitation for the nationals to “come” into the compounds to be the employees of the missionaries. As a result, the church which was established—often in the mission compound or right next to it—was considered to be “foreign” and did not effectively reach the culture.

Too often, the Great Commission mandate to “go” and make disciples of the nations became an invitation for the nationals to “come” into the compounds to be the employees of the missionaries.

Many of these mission compounds did accomplish worthwhile ministry, especially when the missionaries made special effort to go out among the people and focus on ministering to them, listening to them, and sharing the Gospel in ways that made sense to them. In some cases, this ministry would not have been possible without the compounds as a base for service. However, the pull of comfortable and familiar living became a stumbling block to far too many missionaries. Therefore, the idea of mission compounds lost credibility and their use has become less common in recent decades.

### 7. *Foray Methods of the Present*

After decades of decline, the foray method is resurging today. At the extreme end, modern media allows us reach out and “minister to” diverse peoples through radio, TV, the Internet, and print media without physically going to them *at all!* At the same time, modern transportation makes it possible to quickly, easily, and cheaply make “short-term” (typically a few days or weeks) visits to locations around the world. In too many cases, these short-term forays are not only brief, but are undertaken by well-meaning Christians with little or no training or preparation for cross-cultural ministry.



Great distance is not necessary for the foray method. It can be as simple as a church planter living in a city while primarily ministering in the surrounding rural area. This is not to say that this approach is wrong—just that its weaknesses should be addressed. For instance, an urban area might be the transportation hub for a region, in which case living there might enhance travel to multiple rural areas for a more wide-spread ministry. In that situation, however, the church planter needs to be aware of the differences between the urban and rural culture and intentionally take steps to be more involved in the rural culture.

### 8. *An Evaluation of Forays*

There are many reasons why people choose the foray method of ministry. In some cases, the motivation is simple laziness—they are not willing to do the hard work of learning another culture and language. Others are unwilling to sacrifice their comfort or lifestyle—

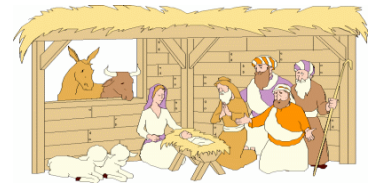
at least not for long—and are looking for an easier way to do ministry. But many others have laudable reasons. For instance, some people who have a strong sense of urgency to reach the lost see forays as a way to more quickly and efficiently reach the most people in the maximum number of places. Finally, there are places where church planters simply do not have the option of going and residing. They are barred by political or other barriers. For instance, missionaries are forbidden from living in many tribal areas of the Amazon for more than short periods, and there are many Muslim areas where missionaries are completely forbidden. In these settings, forays are a reasonable option—perhaps the *only* option. In these cases, *minimal* contact is better than *none*.

## B. Incarnational Method

The incarnational method is based on the example of Jesus. The primary reason for the incarnation of Christ was to enable Him to take our place in judgment and bear the punishment for sin that we deserved. However, the incarnation is also important because it allowed Jesus to demonstrate how we can live in a way that pleases God. The Bible *tells* us how we should act, but Jesus also *showed* us.

*The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. (Jn 1:14)*

When the Father wanted to send the Gospel message to lost sinners, He chose to send it in the form of His Son. Jesus humbled Himself and performed an unbelievable sacrifice to bridge the gap between God and man (Php 2:5-8). Nothing can be more “cross-cultural” than a holy God living among and personally ministering to sinful human beings.



We know that people learn better and faster when they see something demonstrated in addition to just hearing about it. In the same way, it is easier for people to understand how to become disciples of Jesus if they see someone living out a life of discipleship before them. Incarnational ministry seeks to *demonstrate* how the Gospel transforms lives.

Although the incarnational method has many advantages, it is impossible for us to be fully incarnated into another culture. To do so would require that we lay aside our adulthood, be born as infants in the other culture, and grow up immersed in that setting. Jesus did just that, we do not have the ability. Therefore, we can only achieve a *degree* of incarnation by consciously laying aside as many of our cultural biases as possible and embarking on a never-ending process of learning how to demonstrate righteousness in the culture in which we minister.

## C. Comparison of the Methods

In this section, we have been examining the foray and incarnation methods as two extremes of ministry. Table 11.1 lists the main characteristics of these methods as they are typically employed in modern missionary ministry.

**Table 11.1 Two Methods of Cross-Cultural Ministry**

“Foray” Method	“Incarnation” Method
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Quick</li> <li>• Easy</li> <li>• <i>Tell</i> the truth</li> <li>• <i>Quantity</i> of ministry</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Slow</li> <li>• Difficult</li> <li>• <i>Show</i> the truth</li> <li>• <i>Quality</i> of ministry</li> </ul>

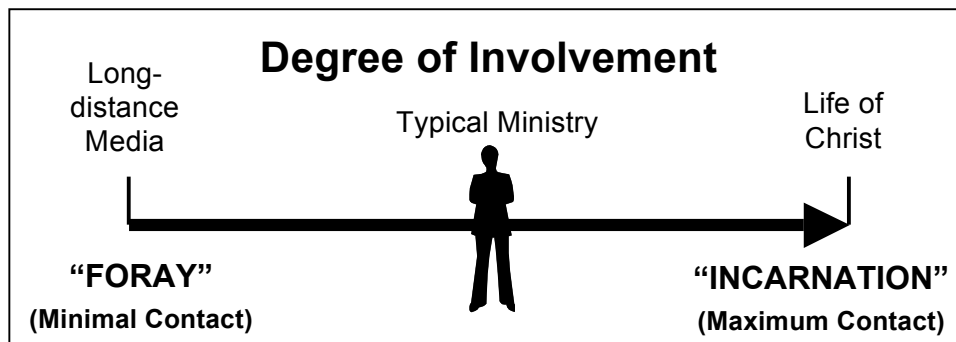
Some of the characteristics listed above can be either positive or negative, depending on the situation. For instance, the foray method is “quick.” Sometimes it is a shortcut for lazy people who are not willing to put serious time and effort in to their ministry. But on other occasions,



it is a wise approach that allows missionaries to quickly respond to new ministry opportunities. Likewise the label “easy” might appeal to those who do not want to sacrifice their comfort, or it might be viewed as a positive characteristic that allows faithful missionaries to minister to more people in more locations with the same amount of effort.

While Table 11.1 helps us to see how the two methods compare to one another, they are rarely put into practice in such a clear way. Rather, most ministry falls somewhere on a scale between these two.

**Figure 11.1 Degree of Involvement with the Local Culture**



The key advantages of the foray method are that it is flexible and can be implemented quickly. However, over time, the incarnation method is almost always more effective at producing life-change and true disciples. Therefore, we suggest that the foray method is preferable only in the following situations:

- When long-term, incarnational ministry is forbidden.
- As a temporary method when there are no long-term, incarnational missionaries available.
- As a test method to gauge the receptiveness of a group to the Gospel and to determine the viability and logistics of sending in long-term missionaries.
- As a quick, flexible response to a ministry situation that is not expected to be open long enough for long-term missionaries to get in place.

In all other cases, incarnational ministry should be the goal. Therefore, at any time, cross-cultural church planters should use Figure 11.1 as a guide to help them answer three important questions:

1. Where are you on the scale of “foray” to “incarnation?”
2. What can you do to move your ministry towards the right (incarnation)?
3. What would a more incarnational ministry look like in your setting?

## II. EXAMPLES OF INCARNATIONAL LIVING

Incarnational living is difficult, but we have many examples of how to do it. The ultimate model is the life of Christ. As we have said, we cannot attain that level of perfection, but we should try to imitate His example as much as possible. That was the goal of the Apostle Paul, as well as of many of the most famous missionary pioneers who traveled to the ends of the earth to reach the lost with the Gospel.

### A. Jesus

Jesus is the ultimate example of incarnational living because He is the only person to fully undergo incarnation. It is impossible for us to fully grasp what that transition entailed because we know so little about the nature of the Trinity and the eternal perfection that Jesus

experienced prior to the time He became human. We can only imagine that existence and compare it to Christ's 33 years on earth:

- He was born in a stable to a poor working-class family.
- As an infant, He had to learn how to walk, talk, eat and do even the most basic activities of human life.
- He was born a Jew under the domination of the Roman government.
- Joseph apparently died early, leaving Jesus to care for Mary and his siblings (Mr 6:3).
- He carried the (incorrect) stigma of being an illegitimate child (Jn 8:41).
- His own earthly family did not believe or thought Him crazy (Mr 3:21; Jn 7:5).
- He lived a life of relative poverty with almost no possessions (Mt 8:20).
- He was persecuted and attacked by the religious leaders of the day.
- He was tortured and executed for His (true) claims to be the Son of God.

Compared to the sacrificial lifestyle of Christ, how can we consider any ministry hardship to be too difficult or unfair? If Jesus gave up everything—even His life—to reach the lost, why would we believe that we deserve anything more?

## B. Paul

The Apostle Paul was the most successful church planter in the New Testament. He established churches in many different cultural settings, as we can see from the varied issues that he dealt with in the New Testament Epistles that he wrote to them. He explained the methodology of his fruitful ministry in his letter to the Corinthian church:

*Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. (1Co 9:19-22 NIV)*

Paul's decision to "become all things to all men" had only one limitation—he was not willing to sin against God's law. He was not only willing, but eager to make any other change or sacrifice in order to bring the Gospel to the lost without the hindrance of his cultural preferences.

It is also noteworthy that Paul made the effort to be like "all men" even though most of his missionary journeys only lasted months or a few years at the most. Today, we might call those trips "short-term" forays and not worry about the cultural differences. Paul, however, considered incarnational living to be an important part of even brief ministries. Admittedly, it might have been easier for Paul to make this adjustment since he grew up as Jew in a Roman city, and most of the area where he ministered was under Roman control. As he traveled across Asia Minor, Paul did not experience as much cultural difference as some of us might encounter. Nevertheless, he was deeply aware of the importance of adapting to the local culture so that the Gospel would be more readily accepted and more fruitful.

Paul considered incarnational living to be an important part of even brief ministries.
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## C. Mission Pioneers

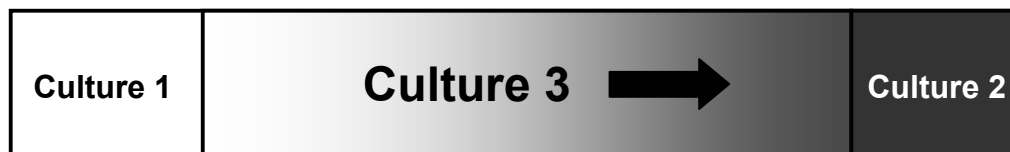
Lesson 5 explained the historical spread of the Gospel throughout the world. A common theme of successful missions has been the willingness of godly men and women to leave their own cultures behind and devote their lives to living out the message of the Gospel among the

lost. The stories of missionary pioneers like William Taylor in India and Adoniram Judson in Burma illustrate the power of committed individual Christians demonstrating how Christ had transformed their lives. Incarnational ministry has been, and continues to be, the most effective way to bring true life-change and establish new churches that fit their context and thrive.

### III. “THIRD-CULTURE” PEOPLE

A helpful phrase to describe people who live in another culture and are influenced by it is “third-culture.” They are from Culture 1 (their original culture) but live in Culture 2 and have been changed by it. As a result they are no longer Culture 1 but neither are they Culture 2. They are now a new culture (Culture 3) which is not exactly like Culture 1 or 2, but shares elements of both. Figure 11.2 illustrates this change.

Figure 11.2 “Third-Culture” People



The longer people spend in Culture 2, the more they will resemble it and the less they will be like Culture 1. And they will continue to exist in this middle realm where they don’t completely fit into either the old or the new culture. It is a difficult position for most people.

#### A. Strangers and Aliens

Hebrews chapter 11 talks about the Old Testament saints who pleased God and describes this same awkward position as common to all of them. They no longer fit into their former world, but the new one was not yet revealed. What the writer of Hebrews calls being “strangers and aliens,” we call being “third-culture.”

These patriarchs and saints did not quite fit into the world where they lived. “Home” was somewhere else for them. Abraham lived his whole life in a tent despite the fact that he was a wealthy man, and he passed that attitude on to his descendents, Isaac and Jacob, who followed his example (Heb 11:9).

#### B. Citizens of Heaven

Old Testament saints were able to live as “strangers and aliens” because they believed by faith that God was preparing another home for them in heaven (Heb 11:14-16). They knew this heavenly city was their destiny, even though they did not live to see it in this life (Heb 11:13). That kind of practical faith pleases God (Heb 11:16).

The attitude of the Hebrews 11 saints should be normal for Christians, even today. The New Testament confirms that “our citizenship is in heaven” (Php 3:20). We were born into this world, but also born again into a heavenly country. Therefore, it is natural and right that we should no longer fit into the culture of this sinful world. And the more we are transformed by contact with God’s spiritual kingdom, the less we should feel comfortable here. As a result, our highest allegiance is not to any country on earth, including our own. And there is no reason to promote any cultural preference over another if neither is sinful. We should be excited about our new “third-culture” status and look forward to the time when we will be free from this life and present with the Lord in heaven (Php 1:21-24).

### IV. INCARNATIONAL LIVING REQUIRES SACRIFICE

Living an incarnational life requires intentionally identifying with and learning about another culture. Doing so accelerates the process of becoming a third-culture person. This change is necessary for effective ministry to another people of another culture, but can also be awkward and

uncomfortable. It is not easy, but is worth the effort because of the increased results. However, it is wise to understand the challenges that incarnational living involves so that we can “count the cost” and be ready to persevere when it becomes difficult.

### A. Culture Shock – Perseverance

Culture shock is what we feel when we are surprised, flabbergasted, or confused by how people of another culture react to something so differently from us. Some degree of culture shock is normal in any cross-cultural situation, but the severity depends on how fully we are immersed in the new culture and how greatly the cultures differ. When we are deeply involved in a culture that is radically different to ours, we can truly be “shocked” and respond with questions such as:

The severity of culture shock depends on how fully we are immersed in the new culture and how greatly the cultures differ.

- Why were they offended by my well-meaning words or deeds?
- How could they come to the opposite conclusion on an issue that I thought was clear?
- Why don't they seem to value my opinions, suggestions, or feelings?
- Why is it so difficult to get to know people in this culture?
- Why is the person I considered a friend suddenly avoiding me?
- Why don't they trust me?

The common thing that underlies all of these questions is the feeling that “I don't understand!!!” The only way to overcome culture shock is to take time to learn. The process can be extremely frustrating. Furthermore, there is no guarantee of steady progress. In fact, it is likely enculturation will occur in fits and starts. Answers to some dilemmas will suddenly appear from “chance” situations or conversations when we notice a connection that we have missed up to that point. At other times, we may feel confident in our understanding and then be blind-sided by a strange situation that proves we aren't as far along as we thought. Over time, though, we will feel more comfortable in the culture and the “shocks” will be fewer and less severe.

### B. Becoming a “Child” - Humility

Typical learning situations make us feel like students, which is an acceptable role. Immersion in a new culture goes beyond an educational setting. We are not merely learning information, but rather, *how to act* or even *how to speak*. In short, we find ourselves knowing how to do almost *nothing!* Rather than feeling like students, we feel like children.



Most adults would be insulted to be treated like a child. And yet, this is the role we must assume in order to identify with another culture. It is exactly the role that Jesus accepted when He “emptied Himself” and was born as a baby (Php 2:7; Mt 1:23). Jesus had to learn how to talk, walk, and act (Lk 2:52). The Incarnation of Jesus was the ultimate example of humility.

We are commanded to follow Christ's example and humble ourselves (Php 2:3-5). We should not underestimate how difficult this is. Our ego and pride will rebel against being treated as a child. Many missionary church planters are highly educated and all have the tremendously important message of the Gospel to proclaim. Even if we overcome our selfish pride, we will still be frustrated by our inability to communicate the message effectively.

### C. “Without Sin” - Discernment

Although we may feel like children, we do not have the freedom to blindly copy all of the values and attitudes of the new culture. Our actions are controlled by a higher authority—the

Word of God (1Co 9:21). We are not allowed to engage in sinful behavior in order to better fit in with the local people.

In actual practice, one of the most difficult things about incarnational living is correctly identifying the line between sin and righteousness in an unfamiliar setting. In our home culture, we usually know a lot of background that gives meaning to any practice or custom. In another culture, this is rarely the case. Some things are clearly sin—adultery, theft, murder, etc. Other things require great discernment to decipher if they are right or wrong.

- Is a particular kind of music a positive expression of the culture, or a way of worshipping demons?
- Is a holiday or feast just a social event, or does it honor Satan rather than God?
- Is a type of medical treatment a reasonable use of local plants and expertise, or is it a way of calling on the spirits for healing?
- Is a close friendship with a particular person a good way to evangelize him, or will my reputation be tainted by his actions so that my preaching will be rejected?

#### D. “Under the Law” - Temperance

To complicate the situation even further, we need to be careful not to engage in practices that local people consider evil, but which we think are allowed. This is what Paul meant when he said he became as “under the Law (of Moses)” even though he was free from the Law through Christ (1Co 9:20). Therefore, he circumcised Timothy even though he taught that circumcision is of no value (Act 16:3; 1Co 7:19). In the same way, he declared all foods acceptable, but refused to eat what would offend a weaker brother (1Co 8:8-13).

When we encounter a situation where we are biblically free to act a certain way, but our freedom becomes a stumbling block for those who believe it is sin, we should consider reining in our freedom in order to retain the opportunity to preach to them. The issue might be food, drink, dress, or a myriad of other things. They will vary by culture. For instance, eating beef is a sin in India where cows are considered sacred. In rural Argentina, where ranching is a major occupation, *not* eating beef might hinder your testimony! In any setting, it is important to not only have an understanding of the local values, but also a willingness to temper our own sense of freedom.



## CONCLUSION

Although there are occasions when we need to quickly launch into ministry to another people group with minimal preparation or cultural adaptation, this kind of “foray” should be used sparingly and considered a temporary solution. Incarnational ministry, as modeled by Jesus, is a far better way to clearly and effectively present the Gospel to another culture. It takes time to understand how other people think and what they value. The longer we are immersed in a foreign culture, the more we will begin to identify with the people and share the message of Christ in sensitive and appropriate ways.

Incarnational ministry is not easy—if it were, more people would do it. It requires perseverance to overcome culture shock, humility to be treated as a child, discernment to know the line between good and evil, and temperance to limit personal freedoms that might hinder receptivity to the Word. However, by living incarnationally, we follow the example of our Lord who left the glories of heaven and emptied Himself in order to reach a lost world. There is no higher calling.

## QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION, REVIEW AND APPLICATION

- Consider for a moment your own reaction to those who do not adapt to your culture. What is your attitude toward foreigners who make little attempt to adapt to your world? Do some ethnic groups

adapt more or less than others? How does that influence your desire to befriend them and learn from them?

- Does your present cross-cultural ministry more closely resemble a “foray” or an “incarnational ministry?”
- What changes can you make in your ministry to make it more incarnational?
- To what degree do you feel culture shock in your ministry, and how are you dealing with those feelings?
- What are some of the cultural customs, events, or practices that the local culture considers acceptable, but which the Bible call sin? How can you avoid them without giving offense?
- Are there areas of personal freedom that you need to sacrifice in order to gain a better reputation within the group that you are trying to reach?

### **ACTION PLAN**

- Make a list of all the things Jesus had to learn to do as a child after His Incarnation. Meditate on how humbling that must have been for the eternal Creator of the universe.
- Read through the Book of Acts and note each time the early church and the Apostles made changes to their lives or ministries in order to reach people from another culture. What issue prompted each decision? Try to identify similar situations in your current cross-cultural ministry.
- Section IV of this lesson suggested that the four key traits necessary for successful incarnational ministry are perseverance, humility, discernment, and temperance. Which of those traits are easy for you? Which require more effort on your part? Where do you need to improve in order to be more effective? List a few practical steps to work on your weaknesses.



# Cross-Cultural Communication [2]

## SHARING A COMMON MEANING

### ☞ Lesson Purpose

The purpose of this lesson is to explain the process of cross-cultural communication and to identify the factors that influence understanding.

### ☞ Main Points

- Messages must be *encoded* and *decoded* accurately for successful communication.
- There are many different signal systems besides speech, and each one can contradict or reinforce the intended message.
- Informal and formal feedback is necessary to catch and correct miscommunication in any setting, but is absolutely vital in cross-cultural communication.

### ☞ Desired Outcomes

When the content of this lesson has been mastered, each participant should

- Be able to list the basic components of the communication process.
- Know the twelve types of signals that together communicate our ideas and thoughts.
- Know how to use formal feedback to test whether or not a simple message has been accurately communicated, and to adapt the message to make it more effective.

## INTRODUCTION

Any cross-cultural church planter will find that communication is often difficult. Misunderstandings happen. Communication problems exist in any setting, but the cross-cultural issues and worldview differences only make them worse. However, by understanding the process of communication, we can take steps to make it more successful.

## I. THE COMMUNICATION PROCESS

Donald Smith defines communication as “a process for creating understanding in which two or more parties are involved.” In simple terms, one person has a thought and tries to transfer that idea to one or more other people. If communication is successful, the recipients will understand the thought in exactly the same way that the original person intended it.

### A. Learned from Birth

We often take communication for granted since we have learned it from birth. Infants have needs and desires. However, their attempts to communicate those ideas to their parents are limited to crying, fussing, and other basic forms. Typical parents spend countless hours trying to figure out what their baby needs—mainly by trial-and-error and often unsuccessfully. This inability of parents to understand the message of the infant is a source of frustration, marital strife, and in extreme cases—child abuse. Over time, however, the infant gradually learns which sounds and actions will cause the parents to respond as desired. In the same way, parents slowly become more attuned to the

We often take communication for granted since we have learned it from birth.

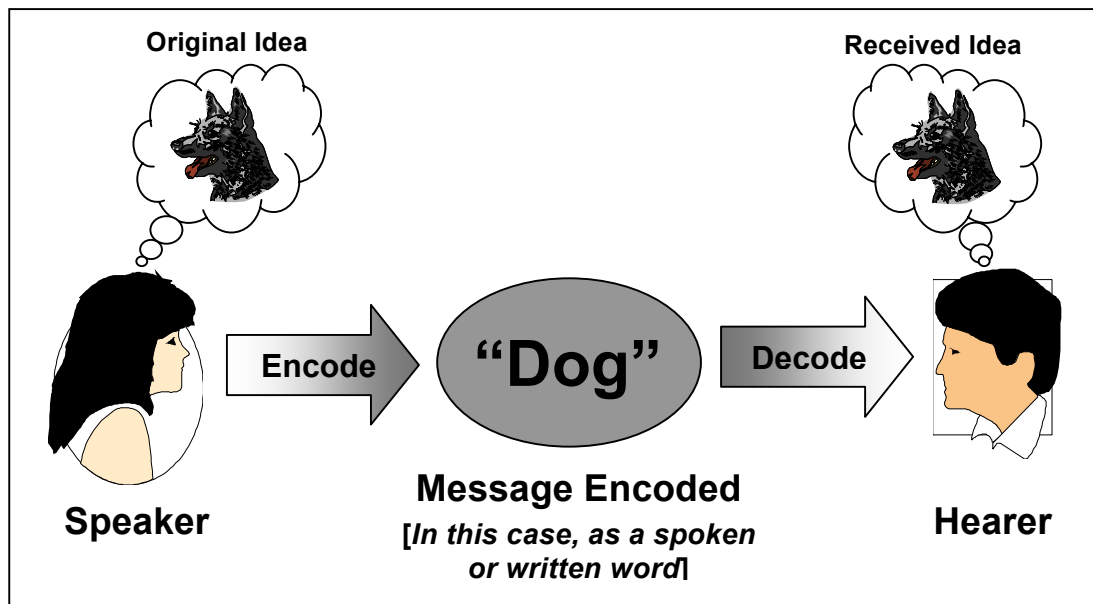
meaning of the various signals that their child makes. Communication improves as both child and parents arrive at a common understanding of what each sound or action means.

Everyone goes through this process and learns how to communicate. When they say “I’m hungry,” other people understand that they want something to eat. This all changes, however, if they are talking to someone who speaks a different language. Suddenly, “I’m hungry” does not mean anything to the other person. The previous lesson noted that cross-cultural living temporarily reduced a person to the status of a child—they can’t communicate successfully. Although we all went through this naturally as children, it is hard to do it again as adults.

## B. The Ideal Process of Communication

A message does not have meaning of its own—it exists only in the mind of the speaker and the hearer. In the communication process the speaker has an idea that he wants to express. He “encodes” that idea by putting it into sounds, symbols, or written text. This encoded form is the message. The hearer receives the encoded message and deciphers the meaning of the sounds, symbols, or written text in order to recreate the meaning. If both the speaker and the hearer have an identical understanding of the sounds, symbols, or written text, the message is transmitted perfectly. This process is shown in Figure 12.1.

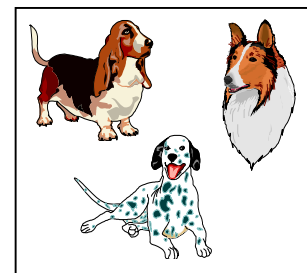
Figure 12.1 The Ideal Communication Process



## C. The Normal Process of Communication

The communication process in Figure 12.1 is *ideal*, and almost never happens so perfectly. In real life, two people almost never understand a message in exactly the same way. That is, they encode and decode it differently and therefore the received idea is different from the original idea. The differences range from very minor to so significant that we would say communication has failed.

In Figure 12.1, the speaker was thinking of a dark-colored German Shepherd dog, and encoded the message with the word “dog.” The hearer decoded the word “dog” as an identical dark-colored German Shepherd. It would be just as likely, however, for the hearer to decode the word “dog” as any of the images in the graphic on the right. In fact, there are so many kinds of dogs that it is unlikely that the hearer would picture a dark-colored German Shepherd unless they shared a common context as in the following situations:





- Both the speaker and hearer owned dark-colored German Shepherd dogs
- Both the speaker and hearer were observing a dark-colored German Shepherd dog
- Both the speaker and hearer had just been discussing dark-colored German Shepherd dogs

It is generally true that the greater the shared context of the speaker and the hearer, the more accurate their communication will be. If they have less in common, the speaker will need to adjust the encoding of the message in order to correctly communicate the idea. For instance, she could have said “a dark-colored German Shepherd dog” instead of just “dog.” Or she might have shown the hearer a picture of a dark-colored German Shepherd dog instead of using words.

**Figure 12.2 The Normal Communication Process**

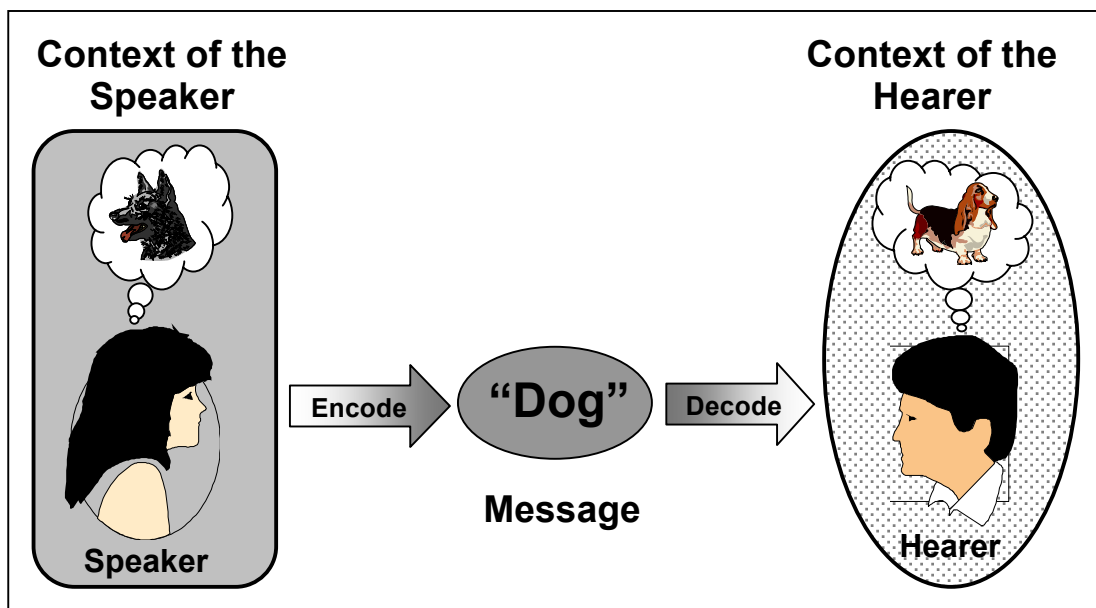


Figure 12.2 illustrates the normal communication process. The context of the speaker and hearer are different. By context, we mean the total influences on their understanding of the message. The contexts of the speaker and the hearer would include the following factors:

- the literal meaning of the word “dog” in their language
- the kinds of dogs that are typical in their environment
- the most recent kind of dog that they had seen or with which they had interacted
- the content of their conversation with each other before the word “dog” was uttered
- their past experiences with dogs
- the status and view of dogs in their culture

The last points are important—the message “dog” does not simply convey an image. It also evokes some kind of emotional response in the hearer. Even if they both picture a dark-colored German Shepherd dog, the message may not be transmitted accurately. For instance, the speaker may love that breed, but the hearer might be terrified of them. Or the speaker may live in a context where dogs are beloved pets and companions, and in the hearer’s context dogs are disease-ridden scavengers. When Jews referred to Gentiles as “dogs” in New Testament times, it was a derisive term. Knowing the emotional meaning of a term is vital to understanding the meaning of the message.

## D. Cross-Cultural Communication

In cross-cultural mission situations, the contexts will be very different and will interfere with communication. It is the responsibility of the church planter, as the speaker of the Gospel message, to adapt his communication so that the hearers understand it. This involves learning the language of the hearers, but also the context in which they interpret the meaning of words. It is important to understand the unspoken images, experiences, and ideas that influence their thinking. This kind of understanding takes time and effort, but results in clear communication of the most important message — the Gospel.

Understanding takes time and effort, but results in clear communication of the most important message there is—the Gospel.

Differences in context are even more important in Christian ministry because there are three contexts, not just two. In addition to the contexts of the speaker and hearer, we also have the biblical context. The Bible was originally written in Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek to specific people in the ancient Middle East. They would have understood the words in accordance with their experiences and surroundings, which are different from ours and also from our hearers. We see this even during Bible times. For instance, the Jews who returned to Jerusalem from captivity in Babylon had forgotten how to speak Hebrew. Ezra and the other scribes had to translate the Law for them and interpret it to give them the sense of the text (Ez 8:5-8). When Philip encountered the eunuch on the desert road, his first question was, “Do you understand what you are reading?” (Act 8:30-34). Although the eunuch understood the *language*, he had not met Jesus, and was therefore unable to figure out who the suffering Servant might be.

Likewise, any culture in which we preach the Bible message today will have a limited understanding of the context in which the biblical stories and teaching were given. Cross-cultural church planters have the daunting, but vital, task of understanding the original message of the Bible in its context, and then making it clear to the hearers in their context.

## II. TWELVE SIGNAL SYSTEMS

The communication model in the previous section is very simplified, even allowing for the different contexts for the speaker and hearer. In fact, the labels “Speaker” and “Hearer” are misleading because communication takes many more forms than just speech. Communication takes place whenever a signal (message) is sent by someone and received by someone else. There is no common agreement as to how many types of communication exist, but they go far beyond speech and writing. In his book, *Creating Understanding*, Donald Smith lists twelve distinct kinds of signals that can communicate a message.

1. **Verbal** – Speaking is the most common form of communication. There are over eight thousand languages in the world and many more dialects. People speak to one another specifically to communicate ideas.
2. **Written** – Written communication is an extension of verbal communication in that it uses the same language. However, the “speaker” is replaced with a “writer” and the “hearer” becomes the “reader.” Written communication can be very precise and makes it possible for both the writer and the reader to spend extra time carefully encoding and decoding the message. The Bible is an example of God using the accuracy of written communication to deliver His message to multiple generations of people.
3. **Numeric** – Numbers are often included in verbal and written communication, but they express precise quantities and relationships that are often difficult to put into words. Certain numbers can have special meaning—eight is luck in China and 7 symbolizes completeness in some cultures. Mathematics is the closest thing we have to a universal language. Two mathematicians who do not share a word in common would be able to communicate very complex ideas through numbers and math. Interestingly, all of the modern digital communication that happens via phones, computers, satellites, and the Internet is simply a string of ones and zeros.

4. **Pictorial** – There is a saying that “a picture is worth a thousand words.” Pictures convey a large quantity of information very accurately. They have been a rich form of communication from the early cave drawings to the pictographs in ancient Egyptian pyramids to frescos in cathedrals. Even today, pictures are loved and used by everyone, whether they be photographs, drawings, paintings, embroidery, or other methods.
5. **Artifactual** – In this form, objects are used to carry meaning. These objects range from the tiny to the huge—the Egyptian pyramids are artifacts. Idols symbolize spiritual beings and statues can represent historical events and persons. Furthermore, objects can be powerful symbols for teaching. Jesus used many objects to communicate spiritual truth, including the cross, the bread, and the cup. 
6. **Audio** – Sounds can be very powerful forms of communication. Music is probably the most universal and widely used type of audio communication, but not the only form. For instance, trumpets have historically been used for military signals and were also used by Israel in the Old Testament (Nu 10:2-10). Audio communication also includes bells, drums, musical instruments, clapping, tone of voice, loudness of speech, etc.
7. **Kinesic** – Kinesics refers to body motion. Kinesics may be as elaborate as sign language, or as simple as a person’s posture. It includes hand motions, movement of the eyes, facial expressions, and many other things that are commonly called “non-verbal communication.” A person who is standing still communicates something very different from a person who is fidgeting or who is bowing. Every motion and position carries a meaning.
8. **Optical** – The optical system includes the use of light and color. In many cultures, specific colors have special meaning. For instance, in Thailand, yellow is the color for support of the king. Red is considered to bring good fortune in China. Black is often a color for mourning. In the Bible, darkness represents sin and light represents righteousness.
9. **Tactile** – Touch is also a powerful form of communication, although the meaning varies by culture. In America, a man and woman holding hands is a romantic gesture, but in Muslim countries it is considered immoral. In Africa, two men holding hands is a sign of friendship, whereas in many western countries it indicates homosexuality. Other tactile forms include shaking hands, kissing, and embracing. In the Bible, Israelites laid hands upon animal sacrifices to confess their sin, and the Apostles did the same to ordain church leaders for the ministry (Lev 16:21; 2Ti 1:6). 
10. **Spatial** – Spatial communication includes personal space, distance, and the arrangement of things. Americans value individual homes with as much space between them as possible, and are uncomfortable when someone is standing too close to them. In many other countries, people prefer to be tightly grouped together, even when open land or space is available. The way we arrange objects and living spaces can communicate how much we value different things or people. For instance, the proximity of a person to the host at a meal or gathering can indicate their status. The dimensions of the Old Testament temple were specified precisely by God, as were the arrangement of the furnishings and the division of temple into different sections, in order to communicate truths about God and worship.
11. **Temporal** – Temporal refers to the use of time. It includes how precisely we divide time and are restricted by it. For instance, in a western business setting, appointments are set by the minute and expected to be kept exactly. People are expected to conform to the clock. In many agrarian cultures, the important divisions of the day might be daylight and

dark, or perhaps before and after it is too hot to work. “Appointments” tend to happen more spontaneously, according to when people are available, regardless of the clock. Another temporal difference of cultures is whether the focus is on the past, present, or future. This temporal emphasis can give important clues about the worldview of a culture and how much they value tradition, current activity, or change.

12. **Olfactory** – This refers to our sense of smell and taste. Sharing food and drink is an important social event which silently speaks volumes in most cultures. Christians remember the Lord and fellowship with one another by sharing in the bread and cup of Communion. Perfume can also wordlessly communicate romantic intentions, and incense is a vital part of worship in many religions, including Old Testament Jewish worship (Ex 30:1-9). Jesus declared that the woman who poured perfume on Him should be remembered wherever the Gospel is preached (Mr 14:3-9).



It is important to be aware of each of these kinds of communication because they can either reinforce or contradict the message. We send these signals automatically, without being aware of how powerful they are. In fact, many people rely on the non-verbal signals to determine if we are being truthful in our speech. Consider several examples where these signals determine the way our message is received:

Each of these kinds of communication can either reinforce or contradict the message.

- We say we love someone, but do not pause other activities or take time to listen to them.
- We say that we are sorry for something we did wrong, but our tone or facial expressions indicate arrogance.
- We say that a person is important to us, but keep too much physical distance between us.
- We say we value the visit of a guest but only talk with them outside our house instead of inviting them inside.
- We express condolence for the death of a loved one, but do not wear appropriate funeral attire.

In each of these cases, the spoken message will probably not be believed because it is not confirmed by non-verbal signals. This can happen even when we are speaking the truth—our posture, tone, clothing, etc. may convey the right idea in our culture, but not in the culture of the hearer! They may completely misread our intent, but the speaker is responsible for knowing the way his hearers will interpret the various signals and adjusting them accordingly.

### III. THE IMPORTANCE OF FEEDBACK

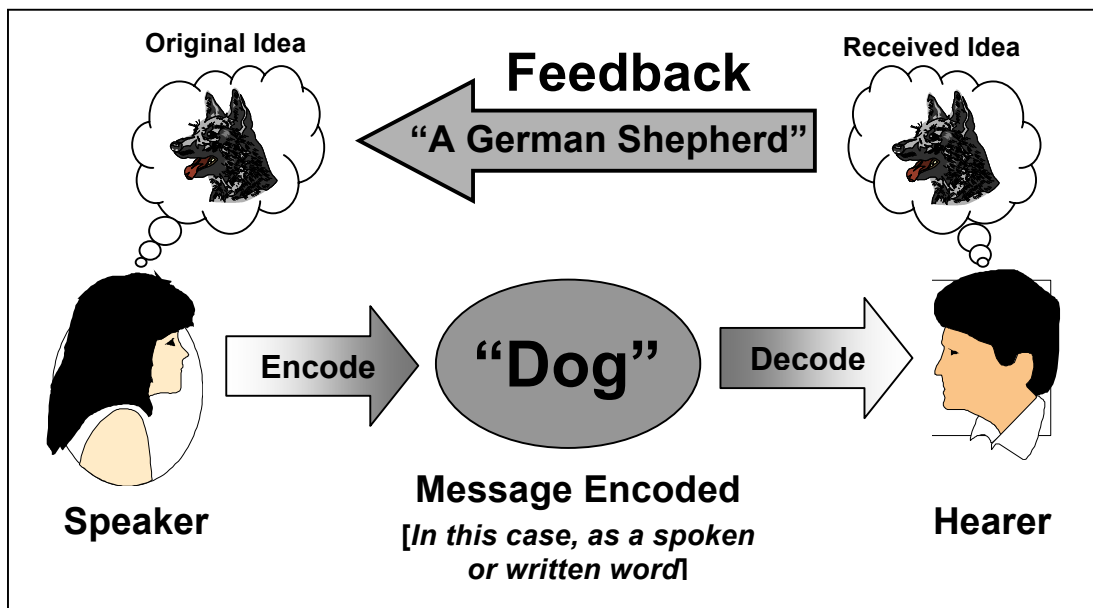
The confusion caused by contradictory nonverbal signals illustrates the importance of another part of the communication process—*feedback*. Feedback is essentially a response from the hearer that indicates how they understood the speaker’s message. Feedback changes communication from *one-way* to *two-way*.

Feedback changes communication from *one-way* to *two-way*.

#### A. How Feedback Works

Figure 12.3 illustrates the communication process with feedback added. In the example, the speaker was thinking of a specific kind of dog and sent that message to the hearer in words. The hearer decoded the message and understood that it referred to a German Shepherd dog. The hearer confirmed this understanding by sending the feedback message “A German Shepherd.” Since that was the kind of dog that the speaker had in mind, the communication was successful. However, communication rarely goes this smoothly.

Figure 12.3 Feedback



In almost every case the hearer understands the message differently than the speaker intended. Sometimes this difference is minor and not important. At other times, it can be so major as to render the communication a failure. Feedback is therefore a critical component because it helps the speaker to identify and correct misunderstandings of the message. Feedback may be verbal, as illustrated in Figure 12.3, but the other eleven signal systems also provide an attentive speaker with important information about how the hearers understood the message. Furthermore, the feedback may be formal—specifically requested by the speaker, or informal—naturally arising from the conversation.

### B. Informal Feedback

Informal feedback is the most common kind of response to communication because it happens spontaneously, and in the case of many of the signal systems, subconsciously. In successful communication, when we tell a joke, people laugh. If we tell a sad story, their faces and body language should show sympathy. These normal reactions serve as feedback. They indicate whether or not the message was understood as the speaker intended.

The strength of informal feedback is that it happens in so many forms. And because this feedback was not requested, it tends to be honest and believable. The weakness of informal feedback is that it is so easily misunderstood, especially in cross-cultural settings. For instance, if we tell a joke and everyone laughs, we might assume that we successfully communicated humor. However, it is possible that they hearers did not understand the joke, but laughed at the speaker's poor use of their language. Instead of the feedback being "yes, that was funny," the true meaning might be "what in the world are you trying to say?" Because informal feedback is not always clear, it is helpful to include requests for formal feedback to verify that the message is being understood clearly.

The strength of informal feedback is that it happens in so many forms.

### C. Formal Feedback

Formal feedback happens when we request a response or make deliberate arrangements for it to take place. It might be as simple as pausing in conversation and asking, "Does that make sense to you?" Or it might take a more structured approach such as visiting the hearers and asking them to evaluate the message that they received. In an educational setting, formal feedback often takes the form of a test—the typical way to measure whether the students understood the course content.

In an educational setting, formal feedback often takes the form of a test.

Formal feedback can also be initiated by the hearers. In response to a particular message, they might ask for an opportunity to discuss it with the speaker in greater detail. Or they might write a letter or send a note in response to a radio message.

Feedback is so important because it confirms that the message was understood as intended. However, formal feedback is more helpful than informal feedback because hearers who provide formal feedback are specifically evaluating and addressing the message. If you tell a joke and someone smiles (informal feedback), he might understand the joke and think it is funny. However, it is also possible that he just happened to think of something humorous as you were telling the joke—perhaps he didn't hear you at all! Suppose, however, you were to ask, "What do you think of that joke?" His response to this request (formal feedback) would almost certainly address the joke and inform you of the degree to which he understood your humor.

Formal feedback is a helpful technique in counseling situations. The counselor can clarify a situation by giving a response such as "I heard you say . . .," which lets the person being counseled know whether they have communicated clearly and been understood. It is also a good technique for marital discussions. Since men and women tend to see things from very different points of view, misunderstandings often happen. By learning to intentionally pause during the conversation and allowing the spouse to express what they are hearing, you can greatly increase the level of communication. This method, which works so well with gender differences, is also very effective at overcoming cultural and worldview diversity.



## CONCLUSION

Communication is the process of transmitting an idea from a speaker to one or more hearers. To do so, the idea must be *encoded* into some sort of message, and then *decoded* by the recipient. The process is far from exact because the hearers never share exactly the same context as the speaker, leading to distortion of the message. When the speaker and hearers are from two different cultures, the chances for accurate communication are even smaller. Furthermore, in any face-to-face conversation, the other signal systems are sending information that may either reinforce or contradict the intended message. These other signals are often subconscious and can easily be misunderstood. Therefore, formal and informal feedback, which is always helpful, becomes vital for successful cross-cultural communication.

## QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION, REVIEW AND APPLICATION

- When you hear the word "dog," what do you picture? What emotions does it generate in you? Do you like or dislike them? Why do you picture a dog that way? What prior experiences with dogs have shaped your understanding? What is the typical view of dogs in your culture? Why do your friends hold this view? Does your view match or differ from theirs? How? Why?
- When you are trying to determine whether another person is being truthful, what do you watch for? Which of the twelve signal systems do you rely on to give you insights into what the person really feels and means? Why do you trust those signals?
- Listen to someone talking to another person. What kind of feedback do you see the hearer give to the speaker? What comments do they interject? What kind of facial expression do they show? What body language is obvious? What other signs do they give to show whether they understand or agree with the speaker's message? Does the speaker ask for feedback? How?

## ACTION PLAN

- In order to demonstrate the way different people understand the same message, ask five people what they think of when they hear the word "dog." Write down and compare their responses. Look for differences in breed, size, color, temperament, etc. This second step illustrates the

importance of formal feedback. Then craft a more detailed message to accurately describe a particular dog. Adjust the message until you can tell it to five more people and have them describe exactly the same dog.

- Compare the simple exercise above to the cross-cultural situations in which you minister. How accurately do you think your audience understands your messages? Are you adding enough detail to your communication? Can you use images, smells, media, role-play, objects, etc. to more successfully communicate your ideas?
- Identify one spiritual truth that you are trying to explain to your cross-cultural audience. Interview several people in the same way as the exercise above. Ask them to describe to you in detail how they understood your teaching about that truth. Compare their answers to what you intended to say. Look for ways to clarify that truth for them. Adjust and practice until it is clearly understood. Then use this as a model for your other communication.

## SOURCES

- Smith, Donald K., *Creating Understanding: A Handbook for Christian Communication across Cultural Landscapes*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992.



# Communication Methods

## [2]

### CHOOSING METHODS THAT INCREASE UNDERSTANDING

#### ☞ Lesson Purpose

The purpose of this lesson is to explain some of the creative, powerful methods that increase the success of cross-cultural communication.

#### ☞ Main Points

- Different communication methods are more effective with different people.
- The choice of communication method depends on the hearers—not the speaker.
- Narrative communication is especially effective in non-literate cultures.
- Redemptive analogies may facilitate explanation of spiritual truth.
- Consider using creative communication methods if they do not violate biblical standards.

#### ☞ Desired Outcomes

When the content of this lesson has been mastered, each participant should

- Be aware of the wide variety of useful communication methods
- Know how to test the effectiveness of the various methods

#### ☞ Appendices

- 13A Redemptive Analogies
- 13B Chronological Storying

## INTRODUCTION

There is a natural tendency for human beings to look at other people the same way they see themselves. We may think that because we heard the Gospel and responded to Christ through a particular approach or method, it will be an effective way to evangelize others. However, cross-cultural ministry is rarely that simple.

Lesson 12 (Cross-Cultural Communication) explained how important it is for missionaries to understand how and their audience interprets their words, gestures, symbols, and expressions in order to communicate clearly. This lesson will discuss another essential part of the communication process—the method.

### I. THE RIGHT METHOD

Wise missionaries use the same language and expressions as the people to whom they minister. However, it is possible to do these things well and still not achieve the desired response or understanding. This often happens when you chose a poor method of communication. The method can determine whether the person hearing the message understands it, and whether or not it penetrates the heart and soul of the hearer.

Unless they are specifically identified as sinful by the Scriptures, methods of communication are not inherently “good” or “bad” and should not be judged as such. Rather, they should be evaluated as to how well they cause clear understanding and appropriate emotional and spiritual responses.



## A. The Audience

The choice of communication method does NOT depend on what the missionary prefers, but on what is more agreeable to the ministry audience. Just as people have a “heart language” which speaks to them on a deeper level than other languages, they also have a more profound response to some forms of communication than to others.

The choice of communication method does NOT depend on what the missionary prefers, but on what is more agreeable to the ministry audience.

The preference for particular communication methods is largely culturally-conditioned. That is, if a person’s family and culture tend to use specific forms, they will most likely be more familiar and understandable to that person than other methods. Therefore, the first step in choosing a communication method is to carefully study how people in the target culture communicate. Questions to ask yourself as you observe include:

- How emotional is their interaction?
- Is their communication concise, or expanded?
- Do they discuss difficult topics directly, or approach them slowly and carefully?
- Do they prefer to state ideas clearly, or to clothe them in stories or allusions?
- Do they prefer speech alone, or do they use images, objects, written communication, or other aids to clarify their message?
- What forms of communication provoke positive and interested responses?
- Is communication predominately one-way, or interactive and two-way?

As you contemplate your audience, you also need to be aware that there will be differences even within one culture. For example, age may play a key role, as might educational level, social status, and a host of other factors. If you are focusing on a particular group of people within the culture, you will need to make sure you understand how their preferences differ from the rest of the culture.

## B. Forms of Communication

Once you have determined the communication preferences of your target audience, you need to choose a communication method that matches. As much as possible, try to use the same forms that the group uses, as long as those forms do not distort the content of the message. In addition, look for forms used in the secular realm by that culture. Although the methods of the world should never be uncritically adopted, a discerning missionary may find acceptable examples in that context. Finally, examine the variety of forms used in the Bible.

## C. Methods in the Bible

God uses a tremendous variety of communication methods in the Bible (Heb. 1:1). The list below is a very limited selection of some of the forms in Scripture:

- Stories – Joseph, Ruth, Samson, David and Goliath, Esther, Job, etc.
- Object Lessons – the tabernacle, the temple, the ark, the cross, the bread, the cup, baptism
- Parables – the Lost Things, the Talents, the Light under a Basket, etc.
- Didactic Instruction – most of the Epistles, Leviticus
- Poetry – the Psalms, large parts of the prophetic books

Why did the Lord speak to us in so many ways? Because people are so varied! To the Old Testament Jews, He emphasized stories and poetry. To New Testament Gentiles, He relied more on the didactic teaching of the Epistles. The Gospel of John, written to the Greeks, is a

very philosophical book. Even today, different people prefer different parts of Scripture. Some prefer the poetry of the Psalms, while others like the clear teaching of the Pastoral Epistles. Still others gravitate to the parables, or perhaps to the narrative stories. The entire Bible is written to every person, but each part touches the hearts of different people in distinct ways.

## II. ORAL VS. LITERATE COMMUNICATION

There are basically two communication processes by which people learn. One method is oral communication that uses stories and symbols as the main way to get ideas, concepts, facts, and information across to others. The second method of communication is the literary method used by cultures where reading and writing have become dominant. This method spreads information through logically developed, sequential, linear summaries or lessons drawn from events, information, and data. The people in these two groups are very different in how they follow along, process, and learn, as well as transmit information about the world in which they live. It is important that the method of communicating the Gospel matches up with the way in which the target group learns and shares information.

### A. Oral Learners/Thinkers

Oral learners are typically people who do not read and write, or have not been reading and writing very long. Because of this, they have relied on their memory to store and pass along information. This is done by categorizing the data in their minds so they can withdraw it again later. To help this process, things that happen are often associated with significant events. This is why an older, more primitive person cannot tell you how old they are, but they can talk about things that happened in the year they were born: a big flood, a severe drought, a hailstorm, etc. Oral learners tend to live in rural areas and in less-developed countries, particularly those that have not had a long history of reading and writing.

Oral learners are not ignorant, nor are they less intelligent than literate learners. One should never assume that they are slow or limited learners. In some ways, their minds are sharper than those who depend on writing in order to remember things. They can learn as fast as people who live in a literary culture. The difference is that they learn in a different way, by a different process. Even their thought processes and patterns are different—the way they think and put information into their minds. Just because someone reads and writes does not make them a literate learner. Oral learning is often deeply imbedded into a person's mental makeup and is not easily replaced. Do not assume that a literate person is also a literate learner.

### B. Literate Learners/Thinkers

Since the invention of the printing press, a literate style of learning has been promoted and emphasized, dominating the western world as the primary teaching style. Since information, facts, and concepts can be written down for later recovery, rather than being recalled in the mind, lots of information can be given at one time. There is little, if any, thought of presenting things in such a way that they are easily remembered. Literate style places emphasis on explanation and interpretation, which are not bad, but often end up confusing oral thinkers and learners. A literate teacher gives out quite a number of facts and then says, "Now here's what this means." This style leaves little room for discussion, dialogue, or looking for the meaning through group interaction or inner reflection. It can actually close down discussion, since the teacher's interpretation has already been given. The teacher is prominent, possibly giving him or her more significance than is warranted.

The impact of a literate style of the Gospel presentation is widespread. With many early missionaries coming from the west, the Gospel spread using a written approach. This style of communication was fine with literate thinkers; however, among oral peoples it did not communicate well. The more literate and expository the format is, the more difficult it is for oral communicators to understand, to relate to life situations, to remember for any length of time, and to recall for use at a later time. The depth of their faith in Christianity could well

have been determined by the method of communication used. It is possible that oral communicators, having received only a literate presentation of the Gospel, will repeat these methods in their evangelism, discipleship, and preaching/teaching, even if it is not the most effective approach for their situation. In their thinking, they have to replicate the same style as they share the Gospel—with less-than-optimum outcomes.

### III. CREATIVE COMMUNICATION METHODS

Communication is much more difficult in cross-cultural settings. The hearers share very different experiences from the speaker and therefore often misunderstand the message as well as the accompanying non-verbal signals. Therefore, it is especially important to use methods other than simple speech to communicate the Gospel clearly in cross-cultural settings. Too many well-meaning missionaries believe they only need to verbally preach the Gospel, when in fact their unclear or uninteresting presentation causes their audience to reject their message. There are a number of powerful communication forms that are effective in bridging the culture gap.

#### A. Storying and Narrative

One of the most powerful methods of communication is narrative. When people hear a story, they cannot help but place themselves in the setting of the story and imagine how they would react in the situation that is being described. When a story is presented well, the hearers not only hear the details, but also feel the emotions that the narrative evokes. In fact, most people actually embellish the facts of the story with their own imagination.

Narrative can help overcome language limitations in cross-cultural communication because the hearers will automatically “fill in the blanks” in the story.

When a story is presented well, the hearers not only hear the details, but also feel the emotions that the narrative evokes.

Stories have the ability to disarm resistance and gain a hearing from even the most skeptical audience. They can state truth in a non-confrontational way. Furthermore, they allow the hearers to imagine the sights, smells, sounds, and feelings that would have accompanied the action in the story. The power of stories to communicate is universal, bridging every culture gap.

##### 1. *Elements of Narrative*

The favored form of stories varies from one culture to another, but most contain the same basic elements. A good story flows so smoothly from beginning to end that we may not realize how the components fit together, but they exist nevertheless. Masterful storytellers instinctively mold the pieces together—the rest of us need to be aware of them and work to develop narratives that will focus and hold the attention of an audience and communicate a point clearly.

- Protagonist – the ‘hero’ or ‘good guy’ of the story. The one whose actions and attitudes should be imitated.
- Antagonist – the ‘villain’ or ‘bad guy’ of the story. The one whose actions or attitudes should be avoided.
- Plot – the action of the story—what happens to the protagonist and antagonist.
- Conflict – the problem or strife that exists between the characters of the story. Ideally, it should be an issue with which the audience can identify in a heartfelt way.
- Resolution – the solution to the conflict or problem. How it is resolved.
- Setting – the time, place, and other details that “flesh out” the story so that it seems real and plausible to the audience.

- Pacing – how quickly or slowly the story develops the characters, explains the plot and the conflict, and leads to resolution. In some cultures, a good story will take a long time to tell, while in others it should reach its conclusion quickly.
- Moral – the teaching or main point that the story is designed to communicate. If the story is formed and told well, it should lead the audience to a point at which they identify with the story and feel that the moral is true.

Before telling stories in a cross-cultural setting, it is wise to spend significant time listening to native speakers tell stories and observing how these elements are developed and understood by the local people. It takes careful observation to discern their ideas of what makes a hero or a villain, what kind of conflict gains their attention, and how the conflict is developed and resolved. Stories of a similar style are more likely to successfully communicate Christian truth in that culture.

## 2. *Parables*

Jesus used parables extensively in His teaching. Parables are ‘made-up’ stories—they did not really happen. However, parables are stories of plausible events that precisely mirror a spiritual example. In most cases, we recognize parables because the text explicitly says that they are parables. Each of the main elements of the parable has a direct correlation to something in the spiritual realm. Often the exact meaning is obscure unless the spiritual parallel is understood or explained by the speaker. However, once the elements are properly identified, a parable presents a clear moral or truth in an easy-to-remember format. The biblical parables still speak powerfully today and teaching them is a great way to present spiritual truth in a memorable way.

The biblical parables still speak powerfully today and present spiritual truth in a memorable way.

## 3. *Chronological Storying*

One of the helpful tools for evangelism today is *Firm Foundations*, a chronological presentation the Gospel through biblical stories rather than as a series of theological facts. This approach also stresses the need to present biblical truth in the same order as it was revealed in Scripture. Appendix 13B explains chronological storying in more detail.

## B. Literature, Poetry, and Proverbs

Many people value thoughts that are carefully formulated and presented as literature, poetry, or proverbs. Since each of these forms requires special skill to produce, cross-cultural church planters will probably not be able to create their own. Instead, they will need to either discover examples that have already been created by talented local believers, or to encourage capable Christians to begin that task.

### 1. *Literature*

One of the simplest forms of literature is tracts. Tracts are brief explanations of the Gospel or other biblical principles—typically only a few small pages. They can be very valuable for use in the evangelization of people in some cultures. They are inexpensive to print, easy to transport and distribute, and require little effort to read. Many, many people have been saved through reading tracts.

In highly-literate societies, the distribution of tracts may do more harm than good. Their use may cause people to view Christianity as a simplistic, uneducated religion. People who have high value of literature will be more open to well-written, thoughtful books. The cost of this kind of polished literature makes it practical only for the targeted use with interested individuals rather than for mass distribution.

## 2. Poetry

In some cultures, the highest form of literature is poetry. Russians, for instance, revere their poets. Naturally, they are drawn to the poetic sections of Scripture such as the Psalms. They enjoy analyzing and discussing the deeper meaning of the poems. In this kind of culture, poetry speaks deeply to the soul of the people and stirs emotions and reflection that can easily open doors to spiritual truth. Like formal literature, poetry is a difficult art to master. Church planters will generally have more success in finding and using existing biblical or contemporary Christian poetry rather than creating their own.

## 3. Proverbs

Proverbs are short, succinct statements of truth. They are easy to remember and pass on to other generations. They are especially valued in cultures with a tradition of limited literacy, but are also common in many literate societies. In these settings, the Book of Proverbs will be very valuable for teaching Christian principles. Conversely, local secular proverbs may be so accepted as true that they hinder the teaching of biblical truth. In this case, it is important for church planters to study and understand the way these proverbs are used and to know what kind of principles they teach. Fortunately, secular proverbs almost always contradict each other, so it is often possible to emphasize one that agrees with the Gospel message.

## C. Drama, Film, and Video

Messages that are acted out are more powerful than ones that are only spoken. People remember things that they see and hear much better than things that they only hear. Drama, film, and video are very powerful teaching tools.

Perhaps the most effective visual tool of all time is the *Jesus* film. It has been shown to hundreds of millions of people around the world, and has been the catalyst for millions of conversions. People of all cultures have been moved by the clear, visual presentation of the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. The *Jesus* film is a valuable resource for church planters. However, there are many other very good Christian films and videos available in VHS, DVD, and other formats. Wise church planters will look for occasions to use these resources. While these films are normally professionally produced, even simple dramas presented by normal Christians can be very helpful in presenting a wide range of biblical truths in interesting and memorable ways.

Perhaps the most effective visual tool of all time is the *Jesus* film.

## D. Music

Music speaks to the soul in ways that few other communication methods do. Songs have a way of getting “stuck in your head” long after they are first heard. The Reformers believed that the hymnbook was almost as influential in discipling believers as the Bible. The Psalms are mainly Hebrew songs—heartfelt emotion set to music. A significant portion of worship in modern churches consists of the Psalms sung to contemporary melodies. The Psalms can easily be sung to the melodies of almost any culture.



The study of the use of music in a culture is called ethnomusicology. The research of ethnomusicologists can be invaluable in guiding the development of culturally-appropriate worship forms. However, such advanced academic study is not always practical. In most settings, simply encouraging believers from the culture to set the Psalms or other spiritual truth to music can bear great rewards. Occasionally, foreign hymns and songs can be imported, but they are seldom effective unless careful attention is given to changing melodies, vocabulary, and phrasing to fit local preferences.

## E. Art

Important messages have been portrayed in artistic ways for thousands of years. The cave drawings of primitive man and the images in ancient Egyptian tombs are two of the best-known examples. The use of art to portray Christian truth was one of the major reasons for the Great Schism that divided the church a thousand years ago. Catholics believed that statues were an important portrayal of the saints, while the Orthodox considered statues to be idols and used paintings (icons) exclusively. Although that division continues until today, both groups understand that art is important for Christianity—they just disagree over *which type of art* is acceptable.

God created the universe with incredible beauty, color, and variety. There is no reason to think that He prefers our church buildings and Christian surroundings to be drab and uninteresting. Skillful use of art can enhance our worship and serve as vivid reminders of Christian truth. Christian art need not be as elaborate as the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel or da Vinci's portrait of the Last Supper. Even simple images and objects that carefully and faithfully represent God's character and acts should have a place in authentic Christian life.

Skillful use of art can enhance our worship and serve as vivid reminders of Christian truth.

## F. Object Lessons

One of the teaching aids that is often overlooked is the use of physical objects that represent spiritual principles. They are readily available and give the audience something tangible to which they can connect biblical truth. Jesus often used object lessons in His ministry and they occur in other places in the Bible as well.

- Bread and wine – represent the body and blood of Christ which were sacrificed for us (1Co 11:23-29)
- The Cross – represents the death of Christ, and also the daily submission of believers to God's will (Php 2:8; Mt 16:24)
- A vine – an image of our fruitfulness if we abide in Christ (Jn 15:1-8)
- Dirty rags – illustrate the sinful nature of even our best works apart from Christ (Isa 64:6)
- A sword – represents the Word of God—part of the spiritual armor that we need to employ daily to resist the attacks of Satan (Heb 4:12; Eph 6:17)
- Garbage – illustrates the worthlessness of our own righteousness (Php 3:8)
- A flower – an example of how well God cares for everything and everyone in creation, and our need to trust His provision (Lk 12:27)
- A palm branch – recalls the triumphal entry of Christ to Jerusalem and His future return as king (Mt 21:1-11; Rev 7:9)
- A lamp – demonstrates the need for believers to let their good works shine before men (Mt 5:15-16)



This is only a partial list of object lessons in the Bible. Church planters who know the Bible well can find a wide array of objects that can serve the same purpose—they are limited only by their creativity. Simple and common objects are the best since they are easier for others to copy and use in future ministry.

## G. Redemptive Analogies

Another creative way to communicate the Gospel is to look for redemptive analogies. This concept was popularized by the books of Don Richardson. As a jungle missionary to a tribe of cannibals, he found that there were stories, customs, and tales within the culture that paralleled key facts of the Gospel. Richardson is convinced that God has placed unique clues

to the truth into every people group to draw them to the truth. The task of the missionary is to identify and use these redemptive analogies. Appendix 13A discusses redemptive analogies in more detail.

## CONCLUSION

Cross-cultural church planters must find a way to plant new churches that fit their culture and thrive there. Part of that process is using communication methods that resonate with the audience and modeling effective methods that the new local believers can copy and use to reach their own people. The focus must be on the preference not of the church planter, but of the audience. There are many creative ways to teach and preach besides simple speaking. These other methods can increase both the interest and the understanding of the audience, enabling them to touch and feel truth in addition to hearing it.

## QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION, REVIEW AND APPLICATION

- What is the level of literacy of your audience? Are they primarily oral learners/thinkers or literary learners/thinkers? Do they prefer logical presentation of information, or do they organize information around events?
- How highly does your audience value storytelling? What kind of stories do they prefer?
- How commonly are video, drama, and film used in communication in the culture in which you minister? What kind of Christian media is available in the local language?
- What kind of music is preferred in the culture where you minister? Does Christian music exist in that language? How closely does it match the kind of music that they typically listen to?
- How highly does your audience value art? Is their appreciation for art reflected in the types of ministry that are being developed for them? How could this be improved?

## ACTION PLAN

- Choose a biblical topic that you would like to present to your audience. If possible, look for a way to present the same message using each of the creative methods described in this lesson. Compare the receptivity of the audience to each of the methods. What do their responses indicate about the kind of communication that is most effective in that setting? Report on the experience to your mentor.
- Read through the appendices for this lesson and consider whether redemptive analogies or chronological storytelling might be effective in your ministry setting.

## SOURCES

- Richardson, Don. *Eternity in Their Hearts: Startling Evidence of Belief in the One True God in Hundreds of Cultures Throughout the World*. Regal, 2006.
- T. McLlwain and N. Eversen. *Firm Foundations: Creation to Christ*. New Tribes Mission, 1991.



## Redemptive Analogies [2]

### DIVINE OPENINGS FOR THE GOSPEL

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#### INTRODUCTION

In the 1970's missionary anthropologist Don Richardson introduced the concept of Redemptive Analogy to the missionary community. The term "redemptive analogy" is taken from the book of Ecclesiastes 3:11, "He [God] has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set *eternity in the hearts of men*; yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end." [Italics are for emphasis]. Richardson's theory is that God has placed within all cultures symbols, rituals, or other concepts that find their fulfillment in the gospel. They are cultural bridges which the gospel can cross over and speak to the worldview of the target culture. As missionaries learn about the worldview of the target culture, they should be looking for redemptive analogies, which can be used to explain the gospel in a meaningful way. Some examples of redemptive analogies are described in the following paragraphs.

#### I. THE PEACE CHILD

In the 1960's Don and Carol Richardson were sent as missionaries to the Sawi people of Papua New Guinea. The Sawi people were one of the few tribes in the world which combined headhunting and cannibalism. They idolized treachery. When Don Richardson shared the story of Judas' betrayal of Jesus, the Sawi people saw Judas as the hero of the story, because he cleverly betrayed Jesus. Jesus was the foolish one to be laughed at. Don and Carol Richardson became discouraged that the Sawi people would ever be able to see Christ as their loving Savior. Then Don discovered a redemptive analogy which pointed the way to the incarnate Christ.

Don and Carol lived in the midst of three Sawi villages. These villages were constantly fighting with each other. Feeling that they were the cause of the tribal warfare, Don proposed to the villages that he and his wife leave the area. The Sawi, not wanting the Richardsons to leave, declared that they were going to make peace with each other. The peace ritual consisted of each warring village exchanging a young child with each other. As long as these children were alive, peace would reign between the villages. The exchanged child was called "the peace child." The Richardsons were able to use this redemptive analogy to explain how Jesus was God's peace child, bringing peace between man and God. This redemptive analogy opened the door for the gospel to take root among the Sawi people. Many, many Sawi people turned to Christ, and in 1972 the Sawi built a large circular meetinghouse for Christian worship, large enough to seat at least one thousand people at a time.

#### II. PLACES OF REFUGE

Don Richardson tells the story of the Yali people of Irian Jaya. Two missionaries, Phil Masters and Stan Dale had worked tirelessly among the Yali people, and had seen some converts to Christianity. However, in 1968 these men were attacked and killed by Yali warriors. Don Richardson was sent by his mission agency to learn more about Yali customs and beliefs to see if there were any cultural bridges to reaching the Yali people. The redemptive analogy that Don discovered was known as "the place of refuge." In Yali culture, places of refuge were circular stone walls. Inside these circular walls, Yali tribesmen were safe from their enemies. Don and his missionary colleagues were able to draw parallels between the Yali places of refuge and the Israelite cities of refuge (Dt. 19:2-7; Nu 35:6). They were then able to communicate how Christ's



redemptive work on the cross was the “perfect place of refuge.” As the Yali began to understand these concepts, many of them converted to Christianity.

### III. DREAMS

Not only do redemptive analogies come in the form of rituals or symbols, but they can also be found in dreams and legends, stories or historical events. Don Richardson tells the story of the the Gedeo people in south-central Ethiopia. They are coffee growers, composed of different tribes, but sharing a common belief in Magano, the omnipotent Creator of all that is. However, in the 1940’s most of the Gedeo did not pray to Magano, but rather offered sacrifices to an evil being called Sheit’an. However, one Gedeo man, Warrasa Wange, did desire a personal relationship with Magano and prayed simply that Magano would reveal Himself to the Gedeo people.

His prayers were answered in an amazing way. Warrasa Wange began to have dreams of two white men erecting flimsy shelters for themselves under a large sycamore tree near Warrasa Wange’s village of Dilla. A voice in the dream spoke to Warrasa Wange telling him that these white men were from Magano and that Warrasa Wange should wait for them. In one of the dreams, Warassa Wange saw himself remove the center pole of his own house and set it in front of one of the dwellings of the white men. In the Gedeo culture, the pole of a man’s house represents his life. Warassa Wange understood this dream to mean that he was to identify with those white men and their message from Magano.

Eight years later, in 1948, two blue-eyed Canadian missionaries, Albert Brandt and Glen Cain, began their work among the Gedeo people by arriving in Dilla in an old beat-up truck. Because of the heat, these men pitched their tents under a large sycamore tree on the edge of the Dilla village. Warrasa Wange heard the truck and saw the men erecting their shelters under the sycamore tree. He came out to meet them, seeing these men as the fulfillment of his dreams. Thirty years after that first encounter, over 200 churches with more than 200 members each exist among the Gedeo people. Almost the entire Gedeo tribe has been influenced by the gospel.



## Chronological Storying [2] TELLING GOD'S STORY IN HIS ORDER

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### INTRODUCTION

The Bible was written, for the most part, as a chronological narrative. This means that the Bible is a story – the story of God at work creating, blessing, judging, promising, redeeming, revealing Himself to man, and restoring the broken relationship with mankind. The story begins in eternity past when only God existed, and continues until eternity future when redeemed man will join the glorified Christ in God's presence. Within this awesome story are many smaller stories – stories of the beginning of all created things, the story of man's disobedience to God and the hopeless consequence that followed. There are stories of the early patriarchs (fathers of the nation Israel), stories about the nation of Israel and God's plan to use them as a blessing to all the nations, stories of Israel's sin and judgment and restoration to God. There is the story of the Promised Redeemer, the Messiah spoken of hundreds of years before He appeared. Within this story are many smaller stories about His life on earth, those He loved and trained to carry on His work here, and the final sacrifice and total forgiveness through Christ. There is the story of the spread of the church, how it grew from a few hundred to thousands and touched much of the known world. There is the story of the promised return of Christ to receive His own and judge the world. The overall story ends with the story of a final battle between God and Satan, and the ensuing celebration for all believers from every tribe, tongue, and nation.

### I. USING THE STORYING METHOD

The following tips are listed to help you use Chronological Storying for evangelistic or discipleship purposes. There is much more that could be presented concerning this subject. These tips are enough to allow for effective communication, leading to clear understanding in order to accept the Gospel.

**1. Storying is chosen because it is the primary communication medium of the target people.**

You must first determine that the target group are oral learners or that the storying method will be effective. Cultural research should help you answer this question.

**2. Stories are chosen based on biblical concepts to be communicated.**

Your cultural research should reveal the Biblical concepts that need to be communicated. Do the target people believe in one God, many, or none at all? Do they understand their situation as sinners in need of a savior? Answers to questions like these will help determine the themes to emphasize, and in turn, the stories to use.

**3. Storying is based entirely on the Bible.**

Stories rely on the scriptures to provide the truths. You need to tell the story as it is presented in the Bible. Refrain from giving your own explanations and interpretations.

**4. Storying is chronological and sequential.**

Stories are told in the order that they happen in the Bible, beginning with creation. The only exception to this element is telling how Satan came into existence, piecing together parts of the scriptures that reveal his rebellion and expulsion from heaven.

**5. Storying looks backward but never ahead.**

It's ok to review and go back over previous stories. In fact, you'll need to review previous stories to help an oral learner remember them. You may also need to refer back to something that happened previously to bring out a point in a current story. *"Remember when God called Abraham and promised him a land, a people and a blessing? Now that the nation of Israel is settled in their own land, we can see God's promises to Abraham coming true!"* But NEVER say, *"We haven't gotten to the story about Jesus Christ yet, but He is the one God sent to take away our sins,"* when still in the Old Testament. What you can say is, *"So you've heard the name Jesus Christ before? Well, keep coming to the sessions and we'll get to stories about Jesus."*

**6. Allow discussion to bring out meaning and application after the story has been told.**

Use questions to open the discussion. *"What does this story help us learn about God? How did the main character chose his own way instead of God's? What was a result of this choice? How do we see that God always keeps His promises through this story?"* and so on. Allow the listeners to struggle for the answers, talking among themselves if they need to, rather than answering the questions.

**7. Stories are chosen to build bridges and remove barriers to understanding God.**

Once the barriers and bridges have been identified, select specific stories that keep the sequence (storyline) flowing through the Bible, and also address the barriers in the target culture. If there are stories from the target peoples' history that are similar to biblical accounts, make sure to tell these stories. Examples may be: the garden of Eden, the flood, crossing the Red Sea, etc. Be sure a connection is made to the local story either in the introduction or in the discussion time so the people grasp how one might be related to the other.

**8. Build repetition and review into the session structure.**

Before beginning a new story, always go back and review not only the previous story, but the applications that the listeners have drawn out. Touch on the themes of scripture and how these were illustrated in the stories. It may be helpful to review several previous stories. Following the story, allow some of the listeners to re-tell the story as they heard it. This helps with review, and it allows the presenter to know if the listeners heard it correctly. If some correction to the story is needed, you can re-tell the story.

**9. A single session does not have to be limited to just one story.**

Perhaps two or three stories can be told in one session. This can be particularly helpful when two or three stories make up one longer story. BUT, after each story, allow for adequate discussion and interaction before moving to the next story. Make sure the listeners have drawn out the application for each story.

**10. Allow the listeners time to internalize the things they are hearing.**

Sometimes, truths from scripture will conflict with or contradict the listeners' own beliefs. These old beliefs don't die easily. You should expect that they will need time to process the things they have heard.

The most important time for reflection and patience is when the message of salvation is presented AFTER the stories of Christ's death and resurrection. An invitation to accept Christ should not be made before this. The listeners may need time to think through all of this before they make a decision. Allow for this, and pray for the Holy Spirit to work mightily in the hearts and minds of the people.

## 11. Storying works best in small groups.

Small groups allow for personal interaction and two-way communication. This is ideal for storying and for building relationships. Remember, your goal is to establish worshipping fellowships – churches – among the target people. Meeting with people in groups helps you more quickly move closer to that goal.

## II. GETTING STARTED

The Chronological Storying method can be used for evangelism, discipleship, and even church planting. At this point we are dealing with the first level - evangelism.

The goal at this evangelism stage is to learn to tell the biblical stories so that people from the target group can understand who God is, how they have offended him, their need for a Savior, who the Savior is, how they can accept the gift of salvation, the new life with the Holy Spirit, and the support they need from Believer's Fellowship.

The first series of stories should be designed to clearly inform your audience about the following biblical concepts:

1. *God*
2. *Perfect Creation*
3. *Man/Woman*
4. *Satan*
5. *Sin*
6. *Character of God*
7. *Depravity of Man*
8. *Need for a Savior*
9. *The Savior*
10. *Salvation Plan*
11. *Holy Spirit*
12. *Believer's Fellowship*
13. *Equipping Church*
14. *Spiritual Reproduction*

## III. TELLING THE STORY

At this stage, the evangelist is primarily concerned with telling the story and checking with the audience to see if they understood the story. *Where was it? When was it? Who was in the story? What was said or what happened? How do you think the people in the story felt? What do you think they were thinking? What did you see in the story that was positive/good? What did you see that was negative/bad?* (Resist the temptation to “teach” or “correct” ... we must accept that if they do not have the Holy Spirit, they will not understand the spiritual meaning. Just make sure they know what happened in the story and wait for God to move in their hearts).

The stories designed for evangelism will climax with the events of the crucifixion, resurrection, ascension, coming of the Holy Spirit, and establishment of the church. The teacher should be prepared, at this time, to respond to any and all who want to know, “*What must I do to be saved?*” (Note – often people are saved at earlier stages in this process. They should be taken aside individually and given a clear presentation of what they need to know). Encourage those who accept Christ to be baptized and join a local believer's fellowship.

Encourage all of the participants, whether they accepted Christ or not, to join a new group designed to go deeper into what it means to follow Christ. This will involve a series of “discipleship” stories which we will discuss at the next training session.



# Language Learning [2]

## SPEAKING TO THE HEART

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### ☞ Lesson Purpose

The purpose of this lesson is to explain the importance of speaking in the “heart language” of your audience.

### ☞ Main Points

- People process their deepest and most intimate thoughts in their heart language.
- Since people use language and vocabulary to think, dream, and imagine, it guides and limits how they process and understand information.
- Interpreters are sometimes needed, but are never optimal for good communication.

### ☞ Desired Outcomes

When the content of this lesson has been mastered, each participant should

- Know how the miraculous preaching in multiple heart languages in Acts 2 impacted the hearers from diverse regions.
- Understand the role of language in the thought process.
- Be able to list the primary advantages and disadvantages of using a translator.

## INTRODUCTION

In today’s interconnected world, people are often required to learn multiple languages for business, education, or other reasons. Several widely-used languages, including English, Spanish, French, and Mandarin are spoken by a majority of the world’s population. It is possible to travel to most of the world and find people who speak one of these languages enough to allow the visitor to get by without learning the local language.

The same phenomenon exists for church planters. Why should they invest extensive time and effort in learning a language when translators are so readily available? Or why should they not limit their ministry to the few people who speak their language? Some argue that this is an efficient use of the church planter’s time and energy. However, church planters have a more complicated task than tourists or businessmen who are interested in their own pleasure or profit. Church planters are working to cause life change. They want to see people transformed into disciples of Christ. This lesson will examine the role of the “heart language” in this process.

Why should cross-cultural church planters learn foreign languages when translators are so readily available?

### I. THE “HEART LANGUAGE”

A person’s mother tongue has often been called their “heart language.” That is, the language in which they think, dream, and feel most deeply. They may be literate, or even fluent, in another language, but it will never rise to the same level of understanding as their heart language.

The Gospel touches people on the deepest possible level. It deserves to be heard in the heart language. Even if individuals hear the Gospel in another language, they will tend to translate it into their native tongue in order to wrestle with what it means for them. As we touched upon in

Lesson 4, it is very interesting that the first miracle after the coming of the Holy Spirit upon the disciples was the gift of “tongues.” The disciples were able to proclaim the Gospel message to people of every region in the hearers own mother tongues—their heart languages.

*Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard them speaking in his own language. Utterly amazed, they asked: "Are not all these men who are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that **each of us hears them in his own native language?** Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs— we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!" (Acts 2:5-11)*

In this passage, each of these visitors to Jerusalem were most likely converts to Judaism, and most probably spoke Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek—the common languages of first-century Jerusalem. Indeed, it seems that the rest of the discussion in Acts 2, including Peter’s sermon, took place in one of those languages.

William Cameron Townsend, the founder of Wycliffe Bible Translators, began his service for the Lord by selling Spanish Bibles in Guatemala. One day he explained to a Cakchiquel Indian that the Spanish Bible was the word of God, the creator of everything. The Indian asked Townsend, “If your God is so smart, why doesn’t he speak my language?” That remark redirected Townsend into a life of Bible translation. In Acts 2, God showed in a dramatic way that He is indeed smart enough to speak the language of every person!

“If your God is so smart, why doesn’t he speak my language?”

There is much debate as to whether or not this gift of tongues still occurs in the church. The experience of most missionaries is that speaking to people in their native tongues requires countless hours of language learning, practice, patience, and perseverance. However, the timing of the gift of tongues right after the command to be witnesses “to the end of the earth” argues strongly for the importance of speaking the Gospel the heart language of people, whether miraculously or by effort.

## II. LANGUAGE AND THINKING

Why does our heart language affect us so deeply? To experience the answer to that question, choose any topic and think about it for a few seconds. Did you notice that words were an integral part of your thoughts? It is almost impossible, for instance, to think of a ball without also silently hearing the word “ball.” Or to think of taking a walk without thinking of the word “walk.” We use our language and vocabulary to think, dream, and imagine. Therefore, they guide and limit our thoughts.

We use our language and vocabulary to think, dream, and imagine.

People who study a foreign language often know they have become proficient when they begin to dream in that language. That is, they hear, see, and think the words of that language as they are dreaming. Language and thought are interrelated. Learning a new language expands our ability to think in new and fresh ways. However, it is rare for a person to learn a second language well enough for it to affect our thinking as deeply as our mother tongue. Therefore, we can make two general observations about the role of language in cross-cultural communication:

1. Learning the language of the audience will increase the ability of a church planter to understand how his hearers think.
2. When the church planter delivers the Gospel in the language of the audience, it makes it much easier for them to visualize the message and to accurately understand how it relates to them and to their situation.

## A. Understanding the Audience through Language

Because language is such an important part of the thought process, it can provide clues as to the mind of the audience. These nuances are sometimes obvious, and at other times they can be very subtle, but they do exist. Consider the following examples.

- **Russian** – Russian grammar is very complex, and so are the people. Russian is a case language which uses similar endings on words, making it easy to rhyme, and Russians deeply love poetry. Normal Russian speech uses a large daily vocabulary and rarely repeats words. Similarly, Russians highly value education and love to sit and talk for hours with close friends.
- **German** – German society is very orderly—some would say regimented—and relies heavily on rules for most situations to avoid uncertainty. Likewise, German grammar is very precise with each piece of the sentence fitting together in very specific ways. It is said that you cannot start a sentence in German until you have planned out how it will end.
- **French** – Spoken French is very difficult to master in part because many of the written letters are dropped in order to create a beautiful, fluid flow of speech. Likewise, the French highly value art beauty. Status of a person is always obvious by the formal “tous” and informal “vous” pronouns used. Similarly, the French value ceremony and formal relationships.
- **American English** – American English is a very difficult language for a foreigner to speak well because of all the exceptions to the rules—so much so that at times it seems like the rules are irrelevant. Similarly, Americans highly value independence and dislike being constrained by rules. Also, they do not have the formal and informal pronouns, reflecting the American idea that everyone is on a similar level.
- **Haitian Creole** – Literacy is low in Haiti, and their language reflects this in the fact that it has a relatively small vocabulary. However, Haitians make a few words say a lot by stressing word pictures and proverbs drawn from their agrarian-based society. Creole grammar is simple and easy to learn, reflecting its historical development by African slaves from widely-varied tribes working together and needing a common language to communicate.

Could this similarity between language and people be a coincidence? Unlikely. It is too consistent across various cultures. What is unclear about the examples above is the cause-effect relationship. That is, do people think in certain ways because their language guides them that way, or do languages develop in ways that most effectively allow people to express their thoughts? In reality, church planters do not need to know the answer—the important thing is that there seems to be a correlation that helps us understand how they think.

### **Personal reflection of the writer:**

*I have studied the Bible in six languages—each of which has added to my understanding in unique ways. Each language helps me to see different details that I miss in the other translations. Some are more faithful to the original text of the Scriptures than others, but even the weaker translations better communicate the intent of the Bible authors in some passages. I appreciate each language—they are well worth the effort it took to learn them.*

*That said, none of the other five languages speak to my heart like my mother tongue. It is not better than others languages, but it resonates with the way I think. When I read the Scripture in my language, I can focus on what the Holy Spirit is saying through the text rather than on the meaning of the words or the structure of the grammar. While I use each language for Bible study, my own is far more fruitful in my personal devotional times.*

## B. Visualizing the Message through Language

We have already said that we automatically convert thoughts and images into words in order to process them. The reverse is also true. When we hear words, we convert them into images in our minds. This process was described in Lesson 12. When we hear the word “dog,” for instance, we automatically picture a dog in our minds. In an ideal situation, the words we hear are specific enough that we form an image that matches what the speaker had in mind.



### 1. *The effect of missing words*

The communication process becomes much more complex when different languages are involved—even if they are translated. There are many ideas, actions, and objects for which an equivalent word does not exist. For instance, how do we explain that our sins will be “white as snow” (Isa 1:18) to a tropical people who have no word for “snow” in their language? Or explain about the Lamb of God (Jn 1:29) to a people who do not have sheep and therefore do not have the word “lamb” in their language? Can we say the “calf of God?” These are but a few of the examples where language severely affects the ability of our audience to form the mental picture that we want them to see. Each of these cases requires an in-depth knowledge of the local language in order to choose words that communicate the truth accurately.

### 2. *The effect of misleading words*

A similar issue arises when a word or phrase exists in the language of the audience, but carries a different connotation. A single missionary woman in Haiti was finishing a meal in a Haitian home when she was offered more food. She attempted to decline by using the Creole words for the polite English phrase, “I’m full.” However, that phrase, “m plen,” in Creole means “I’m pregnant.” This is not at all what the unmarried missionary woman wanted to communicate.

There are many computer-based translation programs today. Some of them substitute individual words in one language for the literal equivalent in another and produce results that are often humorous or unintelligible. Unfortunately, missionaries are sometimes just as unsuccessful because they lack proficiency in the language of their audience, or because they use translators who are not competent. When the Gospel is distorted by poor communication, however, it is not funny—it is a travesty!

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The only way to be sure that we are preaching the Gospel in an understandable, interesting, and accurate way is to take the time to study and learn the heart language of the people to whom we minister. Other methods may be easier or faster, but they will never yield the same results.

## III. USE OF INTERPRETERS

As the world seems to become smaller and more interconnected, it is easier to find and use translators instead of making the effort to learn a foreign language. There are advantages and disadvantages to doing this.

### A. Benefits of Translators

There are times and places when translators are very helpful, or even necessary, in ministry. This is particularly true of high-quality translators who have a thorough knowledge of both languages. The occasions in the list below are times when translators should be considered for use.



- It is easier to use a translator than to learn a foreign language. If the ministry occasion is only available for a brief time, it may be better to use a translator than to miss the opportunity.
- During a survey visit to a new location to evaluate the possibilities for future ministry, using a translator might be the only option.
- While learning a language, there will likely be times when an urgent situation demands a higher level of language proficiency than you have. It is not only reasonable, but wise, to use a translator in these instances.
- Even as you begin your ministry in the new language, the presence of a good translator as a “backup” can help you correct mistakes that hinder clear communication of the Gospel. In this case, the translator is essentially a language mentor, rather than just a translator.
- Oral communication allows for instant feedback when it is unclear. Written communication often does not, and therefore needs to be much more accurate. In most cases written literature, training materials, and important documents should be translated only by a qualified native speaker.

## B. Disadvantages of Translators

There are quite a few problems that occur when using a translator instead of learning the local language. Some of the disadvantages include the following.

- Interpreters are often called “interrupters”—for good reason. When speaking through a translator, it is necessary to continually stop every few words or phrases to allow time for the translation. This effectively either doubles the time it takes to say anything or halves the amount of content you can deliver. Furthermore, it is difficult to listen to a message that is continually interrupted, and also hard for the speaker to maintain his train of thought.
- A common occurrence that most people miss is translators “fixing” the message. There are two main causes of this problem: 1) the translator does not understand the message and makes their best guess because they don’t want to admit their lack of knowledge, and 2) the translator does not agree with the message and therefore changes it to what they believe to be correct. Unless the speakers know both languages—which is unlikely if they are using a translator—they will never know that the message has been changed. This is an even greater problem when using unbelieving translators who do not understand or agree with the Gospel. Unfortunately, this is often the case.
 

A common occurrence is translators “fixing” the message.
- Even good translators become a layer between you and your audience. You only know each other through the interpreter. There are no private, personal conversations. Everything happens in a group of at least three people. This hinders the growth and intimacy of the relationship. Even if they trust you, they may not have the same confidence in the translator, and therefore limit what information they share with you.

## C. When You Have to Use a Translator . . .

From the discussion above, you can see that translators are neither “good” nor “evil.” Rather, they are a resource that you should use carefully when appropriate. They can be very helpful to your ministry as long as you are aware of the weaknesses and have a plan to address those. A few general guidelines will help translation benefit rather than damage your ministry.

1. Use translators as necessary concurrent with your study of the language. Consider them a temporary help. Decrease your reliance on translators as you make progress in the language.

2. When delivering messages through translation, use the following tips to make it more successful:
  - Shorten your message by at least half to allow time for interpretation.
  - Work on making every statement important, rather than allowing filler conversation to slip in.
  - Don't give your translators longer sections than they can remember easily—a few phrases or sentences is enough.
  - Discuss the content of your message with the translators beforehand to make sure they understand the concepts (and don't need to "fix" them).
  - Explain your examples and stories to the translator beforehand to make sure that they fit into the culture and will be understandable.
  - Don't read Scripture passages in your language. Just have the translator read it in their tongue.
3. As you are able, shift from using translators as interpreters to using them as language mentors to help catch your mistakes, improve your speech, and guide your language study.
4. As you become proficient in the local language, employ translators only for technical, official, or literary situations where a native speaker is required.

## CONCLUSION

The most important theme in this lesson is that people process spiritual truth in their heart language. Even if they speak another language, it will not touch them as deeply as their mother tongue. Since we preach the Gospel in order to bring life change, it is important that we deliver it in the heart language of our audience. As if to emphasize this point, the first miracle of Acts 2 was the supernatural ability of the disciples to speak fluently in the native tongues of the widely-varied audience in Jerusalem at Pentecost!

If we do not have the gift of tongues as in Acts 2, the easiest way to speak in the native tongue of a foreign audience is to use a translator. Indeed, there are times when this is a reasonable approach. However, we have seen that speaking through translators is no panacea—it has a whole series of disadvantages. Because of these weaknesses, we suggest that translators should only be an occasional, temporary solution in some settings. The best method by far is to spend the time and effort required to learn the foreign language and become proficient at communication in the language of your audience. All other approaches are inferior to this one.

The best method by far is to spend the time and effort required to learn the foreign language and become proficient at communication in the language of your audience.

## QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION, REVIEW, AND APPLICATION

- Imagine yourself in the audience during the events of Acts 2. How would you react to a group of uneducated people who can suddenly speak dozens of languages with complete fluency? How would that influence the way you listen to Peter's sermon?
- What is the unique strength of your own language? What does it do well? What limitations does it have?
- Have you ever used a translator? How did that process work for you? What problems arose? How effective do you think it was for your audience? How did it affect the connection you felt with the audience?

**ACTION PLAN**

- If you know more than one language, listen closely to a translator at work and look for examples of missing the point or fixing the content.
- Interview people from your target audience, with a translator, if necessary, about what they appreciate most about their language. Look for indications of the unique strengths of that language—the things that it communicates better than other languages do.
- Interview several people who have learned your target language to find out what they perceive to be the unique qualities of that language - its weakness, its strengths, and the way people have to think in order to speak it well.



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**PART 4:**  
**CROSS-CULTURAL EVANGELISM**

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DELTA COURSE

15

LESSON

# Contextualization [6]

## KEEPING THE RIGHT CONTENT

### ☞ Lesson Purpose

The purpose of this lesson is to help the missionary distinguish between the Gospel message—which must be preserved—and the form of presentation—which must be adapted to the audience.

### ☞ Main Points

- Sensitivity to the context
- Contextualization of the Gospel
- Contextualization and cross-cultural church planting
- Implications for cross-cultural ministry

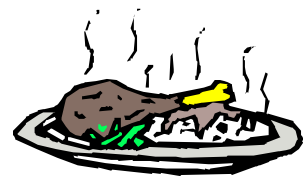
### ☞ Desired Outcomes

When the content of this lesson has been mastered, each participant should

- Be able to define the term “contextualization.”
- Understand the key components of the unchangeable Gospel message.
- Be sensitive to the way the presentation influences the acceptance of the message.
- Be aware of some of the cultural issues that should be considered in cross-cultural ministry.

## INTRODUCTION

Suppose you go to a new restaurant and decide to try an entrée that sounds good, but which you have never tasted. You wait patiently for your food, wondering if you have made the right choice, or whether you should have eaten at your usual restaurant. Soon, your meal arrives, but there is a problem. The plate is dirty, the waiter is sloppily dressed in filthy clothes, and the ashes of his cigarette are falling on your plate. He is also rude to you, as are the people who are talking obnoxiously loud at the next table. Furthermore, the table cloth is ragged, and the chair is uncomfortable. How would you react? Most people would abruptly leave and never return.



### I. SENSITIVITY TO THE CONTEXT

What can we learn from this story? The most important lesson is that the entrée itself was not the problem. It might have been delicious. The problem was the offensive way the food was presented, which removed any desire you had to taste it. When we speak of the “contextualization” of the Gospel, we are talking about a similar situation. The Gospel is good news that salvation has been fully purchased by Christ and is available to every person who trusts in Him. It is a wonderful message. However, the way we present Jesus to the lost can greatly affect whether or not they take the time to taste and see that the Lord is good (Ps 34:8).

Contextualization begins with an understanding of Form and Function, but goes further to the next logical step. The principles of Form and Function help us distinguish between the *purpose* of church activities and the *methods* that we use to accomplish them. Contextualization involves

*evaluating* which forms are the most effective at accomplishing functions *within a specific cultural group*. In other words, contextualization is the skillful application of Form and Function principles in cross-cultural ministry. Contextualization begins with evangelism, but is also important in discipleship.

## II. CONTEXTUALIZATION OF THE GOSPEL

When we contextualize evangelism, we choose methods that clearly and effectively communicate the Gospel in ways that are as intelligible and acceptable as possible to the audience. That is, we must adjust how we present the message to fit the new context in which it will be understood. At the same time, however, we need to be careful to adapt the *presentation* without changing the core content of the *message*.

### A. The Gospel Message

Contextualization of the Gospel should never involve changing the message itself. There is only one true Gospel, and God is the Author (Gal 1:11; Eph 4:5; 1Th 2:8-9; 2Ti 1:11). The Apostle Paul dogmatically stated that anyone who preaches a different Gospel should be cursed (Gal 1:6-12; 2Co 11:4). In 1 Corinthians 15 he explained that the Gospel consists of two key facts:

1. Christ died for our sins—the proof being His burial (1Co 15:3-4)
2. Christ rose from the dead—the proof being His appearances (1Co 15:4-8)

This simple statement summarizes the wealth of truth found in the Passion and the Resurrection. Christ's death for "our sins" assumes that we understand that we were lost sinners, and that only the blood of Christ could appease God's wrath. This part looks back at our forgiveness through Jesus. The fact that Christ "rose" assures us that He is the Son of God with the power over life and death, and gives us confidence that we will indeed spend eternity with Him. When Paul spoke to the Ephesian elders, he explained that this message of "repentance" and "faith" was what he preached to both Jews and Greeks (Ac 20:21).

A true Gospel message cannot neglect either of these two key components. The Cross must be preached even if it is offensive or foolish to the hearers (Ro 1:14-16; 1Co 1:17-24; 1Co 2:2; Ro 3:9-11). We must not suggest that any other religious act or god has any merit before the Lord (Jn 14:6; Ac 4:12; 1Ti 2:5-6; 1Jn 5:11-12). Those who change the Gospel *message* in order to please the hearers are false teachers—not servants of God (Gal 1:10; 2Ti 4:2-5).

### B. The Gospel Presentation

Although there is only one Gospel, there are many ways to deliver it to the lost. Mothers know that it is easier to get a child to take medicine with sugar or honey. Wise Gospel preachers follow their example. They find ways to encourage the lost to taste the Gospel that cures their separation from God. They adapt the *presentation* of the message. Some of the things that we must carefully consider as we minister in cross-cultural situations include:

- the language and form of speech used
- the relationship of the speaker to the hearers
- the attitude, expressions and body posture of the speaker



There are many examples of contextualization of the Gospel presentation in the New Testament. Although the Apostle Paul was unwilling to compromise on the message of the Cross, he made every effort to become "all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some" (1Co 9:22). When he spoke to the Athenians, he began by recounting his study of their religious alters and objects (Ac 17:22-23). At Ephesus, he began with their knowledge of John's baptism (Ac 19:1-6). In Jerusalem, he switched his language from Hebrew to Greek (Ac 21:37-39) to Aramaic (Ac 21:40-22:2). Before the Sanhedrin, he

appealed to his former status as a Pharisee (Ac 23:6). In his trials before Felix and Agrippa, Paul use very respectful and educated language (Ac 24-26). He used his Roman citizenship as a means to testify to Caesar (Ac 25:11).

In an even more striking act, Paul circumcised Timothy to facilitate witness to the Jews (Ac 16:3) even though he adamantly opposed circumcision as a requirement for their salvation (Ac 15:1-2). He was in favor of circumcision to promote the Gospel *presentation*, even though he was against circumcision as part of the Gospel *message*. In the same way, he avoided payment for his preaching for fear it might hinder the Gospel—instead living on his own earnings or on gifts from other churches (1Co 9:6-18). Paul was sensitive to the way people from every culture might react to him, preferring to yield his own rights, privileges and preferences in order to make the Gospel attractive (Tit 3:2; Heb 12:14).

### C. The Gospel Messenger

Although we have been talking about the *presentation* of the Gospel, it might also be accurate to say that many of these biblical examples concern making the *messenger* attractive to the lost, so that they will listen to the *message*. Paul was so concerned for the lost that they understood that his love was genuine—not an act to fool them (Ac 20:18-20; 1Th 2:6-9). Carefully planned methods will not work without genuine love (1Co 13). Biblical love should motivate the missionary to be sensitive to the issues that are important to his audience. Missionaries who humbly admit that they do not know all the answers are more likely to be accepted by their hearers.

## III. CONTEXTUALIZATION AND CROSS-CULTURAL CHURCH PLANTING

Contextualization should not end once a person is saved. It should also guide the spiritual growth of the disciple and the local church. Just as changes in the presentation and messenger can lead to greater acceptance of the Gospel, culturally-sensitive forms and methods in the church can lead to greater maturity, more sincere worship, and more effective leadership development in the church.

### A. Diversity in the Body of Christ

Jesus prayed that His disciples would become “one” (Jn 17:11, 21-23). But what did He mean by “one?” Clearly, we are “one” in the sense of being unified, of having a common faith, a common bond, and a common future (Ro 15:5; Eph 4:3, 13; Col 3:14). We are to consider one another and to act for the common good (Php 2:1-4). However, “one” is not equivalent to the “same.” Within the unity of the Body, God has created great diversity for His glory and pleasure (1Co 12). All of history is moving toward God’s goal of having people from “every tribe and language and people and nation” fall before Him in worship (Rev 5:9; 7:9).

Would you enjoy a choir with just one voice? A song with one note? An orchestra with one instrument? A painting in one color? How dull and boring! In light of the incredible variety of the world that God has created, why would we think that He wants believers to look and act alike? An important task for any church planter is to identify the unique ways that God has created his congregation to learn, worship, pray, teach, preach, and live. For the missionary working with another culture, this is challenging, but extremely important. We are not trying to make everyone part of “one nation,” but to bring “all nations” into a relationship with their Creator (Ge 12:2-3; Ps 67: 2-3).

Would you enjoy a choir with just one voice? A song with one note? An orchestra with one instrument? A painting in one color? How dull and boring!

### B. Maintaining the Purity of the Church

Diversity is not an excuse to do whatever we want. Some things are clearly sin for everyone because the Word of God identifies them as such. Lying, hypocrisy, adultery, murder, and theft are just a few things that are forbidden throughout the Scriptures. No amount of sensitivity to culture can justify permitting these actions. This was the error of the Corinthian



church—they accepted immorality instead of judging it (1Co 5). The Holy Spirit personally judged Ananias and Sapphira for their hypocrisy (Ac 5:1-11), and it seems that other New Testament believers suffered disease or death because they failed to forsake their sin (1Co 11:27-34).

### C. Freedom in Christ

The areas where contextualization is most difficult to apply are those that concern “Christian liberty.” While some things are allowed or forbidden for all people, other issues are more complex. Some things were permissible only to particular people, or at particular times. For example, Adam was only allowed to eat plants and fruit (Ge 1:29). But after the flood, God added meat to man’s diet, but without blood (Ge 9:3-4). Later, God gave to Israel a very specific list of allowed and forbidden food (Lev 11). Yet in the early church, Paul says that instruction to “abstain from certain foods” is the sign of false teachers, and that “nothing is to be rejected” (1Ti 4:1-5). Daniel was praised for abstaining from unclean food (Da 1:8), but Peter was rebuked by the Lord (Ac 10:13-15). Therefore, we need to be very careful not to apply random verses to a particular audience, but instead to carefully study how the Scripture applies to each situation.

The areas where contextualization is most difficult to apply are those that concern “Christian liberty.”

There are many New Testament examples where distinguishing between “Christian liberty” and “sin” was difficult. Marrying or remaining single was an individual decision, depending on one’s gift from God and ability to live in purity (1Co 7). Paul was free to eat meat sacrificed to idols, unless his freedom became a temptation for a weaker brother (1Co 8). Paul preached against drunkenness (Eph 5:18), but told Timothy to drink wine for his stomach problems (1Ti 5:23). Paul confronted Peter for ceasing to eat with Gentiles when other Jews were present (Gal 2:11-14).

There are other more surprising examples of freedom in the Bible. Although Naaman promised to never worship other gods, Elisha accepted his petition for forgiveness when he was forced to bow in pagan temples with his master (2Ki 5:17-19). Even the preferred day of worship appears to be a matter of personal freedom (Ro 14:5-6). The biblical principle is to do everything possible to promote the spiritual growth and health of other believers (Ro 14:19; 1Co 10:32). Cross-cultural missionaries have a great deal of freedom to choose forms and activities that conform to the spiritual level of their congregations, but also a serious responsibility.

## IV. IMPLICATIONS FOR CROSS-CULTURAL MINISTRY

Just as it was in the New Testament, finding the balance between cultural freedom and biblical absolutes can be messy. It is vital that the missionary continually go back to Scripture for counsel on issues of church forms, evangelism, etc. Bringing forms and methods from one culture into another without critical evaluation of them is almost never wise or effective. A cross-cultural missionary must be both flexible and grounded in the Word.

### A. Understanding Evangelism

When bringing the Gospel to a culture other than your own, do so with humility and as a learner. Yes, you understand the Gospel more clearly than your audience, but you do not understand the people. Take time to listen to them, and reflect deeply on what they are saying. Make every effort, like the Apostle Paul, to appreciate the things in their culture that are not sinful, and look for common bonds and points of contact. Everyone, in every culture, has some common issues involving family, children, parents, work, health, etc. Find those areas of common interest and experience and use them to build bridges to the people.

Learn to do things in new, culturally-appropriate ways, even if they seem strange to you. Russians present gifts of flowers wrapped in newspaper—something that would be offensive in Western Europe. Handing an Arab in some countries a gift of food with the left hand would

also be offensive. In some cultures, the elderly merit special respect and deference. Other cultures may strictly limit interaction between men and women. Dress that is stylish in one country may be shameful in another. We need to honor those differences if there is not a clear biblical reason not to do so. Our goal, like Paul's, is to become all things to all men in order to win them. In this way, we follow Christ, who became flesh for us, yet without sin (Heb 4:15).

## B. Appropriate Discipleship

One of the hardest things for some missionaries to learn is that they are to make disciples who look like Jesus—not like the missionary. The disciples at Antioch were called “Christians” because they acted like Christ, rather than like Saul and Barnabas (Ac 11:26). The purpose of disciples is to multiply themselves—to pass on their faith to others (2Ti 2:2). Therefore, the missionary will make much more progress in penetrating the new culture with the Gospel if he helps new converts find a form of Christianity that is both biblical and relevant to the local culture. If this balance is achieved, the new disciples will be even more effective in ministering to their culture than the missionary. That should be the missionary's goal, rather than a threat.

The missionary will make much more progress in penetrating the new culture with the Gospel if he helps new converts find a form of Christianity that is both biblical and relevant to the local culture.

At the same time, the missionary has the responsibility to teach the principles and commands of God's Word to the new believers. Although they will know more about the local culture than the missionary, they will initially know less about the Scriptures and the Christian faith. The process of discipleship is not finished until the believers understand and obey all of the commands of Jesus (Mt 28:20). In order for this to happen, there will also need to be faithful local leadership that can pass on their faith (2Ti 2:2). As the burden of ministry shifts from the missionary to the local believers, the missionary will need to guide them in adopting forms and practices that do not conflict with biblical Christianity. The end result should be Christianity with a local flavor, but with a solid foundation (1Co 3:10-11).

## CONCLUSION

Contextualization is an ongoing process that begins with evangelism and continues through the discipleship and leadership-training stages. The primary objective of contextualization is to adapt the *presentation* of the Gospel and the *messenger* of the Gospel (the missionary) to be more acceptable to the local culture. However, the core *message* of the Gospel cannot and must not be changed. Repentance and faith in Jesus is a universal message that applies to all people, everywhere, in every culture.

God's ultimate purpose in salvation is to sanctify a group from every tribe, language, people and nation that will glorify Him forever (Rev 5:9). Cross-cultural missionaries have the privilege of reaching some of those diverse people and helping maintain the beautiful diversity that God has created, while confronting and correcting sinful attitudes and practices that are contrary to the Word of God. In order to do this effectively, missionaries must approach their ministry with humility and love, knowing that the task is complex, but extremely important.

## QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION, REVIEW AND APPLICATION

- What is “contextualization?”
- What is the difference between “Form and Function” and “contextualization?”
- What is wrong with changing the Gospel message to make it more acceptable to the lost?
- What is the role of “diversity” in the Body of Christ?
- How does contextualization apply to discipleship?

**ACTION PLAN**

- Write out a sample Gospel presentation as if you were giving it to a lost person. Then carefully evaluate it to see if it contains the essential elements of the Gospel. Also note which things you have included would really be cultural preferences or practices. Rewrite your presentation until all core Gospel points are present. Then begin to add examples that would make it more clear to your target audience.