

## INTRODUCTION TO CROSS CULTURAL MINISTRY

### ***THE BIBLE IS MULTI-CULTURAL***

The Bible is a cross-cultural (cc) training document. It has the only absolutes that we possess. A member of any culture can use it safely to relate both to God and to fellow humans. Ted Ward, a missiologist, has said that commonalities outweigh differences among people. We are more alike than dissimilar. The image of God rests on all people (Gen. 1:27). All people have a longing for eternity in some form, for instance (Eccles. 3:11). God has given people consciences, which reflect another attribute shared with God, morality (Rom. 2:14-15). Humans also love, which reflects God (1 John 4:8). People also have an aesthetic sense--we appreciate sunsets and art. We enjoy beauty because God made that beauty. He himself is beautiful (Ps. 27:4). He is extravagant with that beauty, creating flowers that none will ever see but Himself. We have highly developed *symbolic* language. Animals communicate, but not through symbols.

The principles of Scripture are intended by God to be used by persons of any culture in relation to other persons of any other culture or subculture. Otherwise, it would be good for only Near Eastern and Greco-Roman cultures.

### ***THE BIBLE IS ABOVE CULTURE***

The Bible is above culture, since it stands to judge any culture. There are elements of "common grace" insights that even pagans enjoy. The Greek poet Aratus wrote, accurately, "We are his [God's] offspring." (Acts 17:28). He referred to Zeus, but the statement is true of Deity (F.F. Bruce, 1954, *The Book of the Acts*, Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, Mich., p.360). Non-believers may discover truth and employ correct principles, reaping their benefits. Many Chinese model principles for generating income in Proverbs and are financially successful. God reveals much about Himself, such as His "eternal power and divine nature" (Rom. 1:20), but even this is "suppressed", or *consciously* denied by godless people (Rom. 1:18 NIV).

A culture may reflect God's principles of hospitality to strangers (Ex. 22:21; Lev. 19:10; Heb. 13:2), for instance. It may have strong taboos against embarrassing anyone ("face" saving, 1 Cor. 13:4), but may allow parents to invade and control the marriage of a son or daughter (Eph. 5:31).

Scripture stands in judgment of culture, not culture over the Bible. Jesus declared that the cultural assertions of Samaritans regarding the place to worship to be absolutely wrong (John 4:19-22). Paul wrote, "Even one of their own prophets has said, 'Cretans are always liars, evil brutes, lazy gluttons.' This testimony is true. Therefore rebuke them sharply, so that they will be sound in the faith." (Tit. 1:12-13). However, in the same chapter, Paul gave behavioral guidelines for the selection of elders, which were in complete harmony with those given to Timothy for other cultures, illustrating absolute moral criteria (Tit. 1:5-9; 1 Tim. 3:1-7). Whenever culture and Scripture conflict, culture must be judged. Democratic societies operate on majority consensus, or majority morality (sociological "truth"). Perhaps the greatest hermeneutical challenge today is at this point: What in the Bible was the result of cultural conditioning and what is enduring to all generations and peoples? Not a few, for example, believe that a woman *should* teach men in the church today, despite 1 Tim. 2:12, since, we are told, women were domineering a local church and it was simply a local problem, confined to one time and culture. However, Paul's reasoning in his prohibition goes all the way back to Adam and Eve, to the origin of

Crosscul.doc2

gender relationships, which suggests a larger application of his words (1 Tim. 2:13-14). The issue of polygamy is similar. Those opposing it go to Gen. 2:24, where one man and one woman become "one flesh" (cf. Matt. 19:5), which is the clearest and most authoritative teaching. Some believe that polygamy is valid in the church today, as for instance Father William Knipe, an American Maryknoll missionary in East Africa ("Africanizing' the Church", *Newsweek* 126(14): 56, Oct. 2, 1995). God did seem to sanction polygamy in the Old Covenant (2 Sam. 12:8).

As Marvin K. Mayers has pointed out, missionaries are change agents (*Christianity Confronts Culture*, Zondervan, 1987, p. xiv). They have stopped widow burning in India, the killing of twins in Africa, and prostitution in Hawaii. They have introduced hospitals and education and dignity for women. In thousands of ways Christians have been salt and light in culture, exposing darkness and preserving the good.

God is both able and willing to reveal errors in our understanding (Phi. 3:15). 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). However, understanding God's mind involves nonconformity to the prevailing unchristian worldview (Rom. 12:2). A culture will be as Christian as its people have been permeated with biblical truth.

### ***THE ORIGIN OF COMMUNICATION***

We communicate because God communicates. Francis Schaeffer has shown that within the Trinity, there was both communication and love. Jesus had glory, and the love of the Father before the creation of the world (John 17:5, 24). The Father communicated to the Son that Jesus was to go into our world (John 17:18). There was knowledge of each Person of the Trinity (John 17:25). The Word had fellowship with God (John 1:1) before coming to earth. The Spirit is also eternal (Heb. 9:14), and was present with the Father and Son from the creation of the world (Gen. 1:1-2; John 1:3; Col. 1:16). As Schaeffer has noted, the love and communication among the Trinity is the basis of love and communication among men and women whom He has created in His image (Gen. 1:27).

### ***DIVISION CAUSED BY SIN***

Schaeffer also correctly observed that this world is abnormal, due to the effects of sin, which has affected every aspect of human existence, including the mind (in contrast to Aquinas' view). Man is separated from God, which creates a spiritual division. He is separated from society, which creates sociological problems. He is separated from groups within society, even within his own culture, which creates social psychological divisions. He is even separated from himself, creating psychological problems. The Gospel is able to bridge each separation. However, the existence of these divisions creates challenges both within and among cultures. Normal differences are magnified by sin, and exploited by Satan. This is so among Christians, as well as non-Christians.

Fallen people join in fallen societies. It is possible for certain sins to dominate a city, as sexual perversion dominated Sodom and Gomorrah (Jude 1:7). Intellectual pride seems to have overtaken Athens in the first century A.D. (Acts 17:18). The Assyrians were known for their cruelty (Nahum 3:19). Such strongholds of sin require divinely powerful weapons to destroy them. Among such weapons is prayer (2 Cor. 10:4-5). Conversion of individuals will result in the change of societies, composed of individuals. A Christian is a "new creation", following a new master, with new goals and values (2 Cor. 5:17; Col. 1:13). But even Christian churches can have strongholds of sin, as the letters

Crosscul.doc3

to five of the seven churches in Revelation reveal (Rev. 2-3). Ephesus lacked love for God (Rev. 2:4); Thyatira apparently tolerated sexual immorality (Rev. 2:20); Sardis was complacent (Rev. #2-3); Laodicea was proud (Rev. 3:17).

Nor only are individuals fallen historically through Adam (Rom. 5:12), but they are actively dominated by a wicked ruler, Satan. "The whole world is under the control of the evil one." (1 John 5:19). God's superior power is evident, however. Jesus keeps God's people safe (1 John 5:18). Satan's defeat is decreed (Rev. 20:10). Conversion robs Satan of a subject, so evangelism is spiritual warfare. Considering the enemy, we can do *nothing* apart from Christ (John 15:5). Satan has his subjects in supernatural blindness (2 Cor. 4:4). Christians are advised to wear the full armor of God (Eph. 6:10-18), so that they can "be strong in the Lord and in *his* mighty power." (Eph. 6:10). Cross cultural ministry *compounds* the normal problems of evangelism, increasing possible misunderstanding.

Because of the supernatural nature of resistance to the Gospel, the Holy Spirit must come in convicting power upon the unsaved (John 16:8). This is technically an *awakening*, in contrast to a *revival*. When the Spirit comes in conviction upon a church, it is revival. The best conditions for the spread of God's Kingdom exist during the powerful outpourings of the Spirit, as the worldwide revival/awakening of 1905 demonstrates. Dramatic conversions were common, especially in Wales. The Welsh revival sparked the Korean revival (J. Edwin Orr). One hundred years have elapsed since the last worldwide revival. The most prudent mission strategy is prayer for the Holy Spirit to come upon both the Church and the lost in great power. Generally a revival results in zealous new missionaries, as with the East Africa Revival, begun in 1930.

## ***A BIBLICAL THEOLOGY OF MISSIONS***

God is intentionally involved in cross-cultural ministry. Because Christians are to go to every ethnic group (*ethnv*), this implies not only the mandate, but its feasibility. In fact, Christ Himself accompanies us (Matt. 28:19-20, cf. Heb. 13:5-6).

In the Old Testament, Christ was to be a "light for the Gentiles" (Is. 42:6-7). "It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth." (Is. 49:6, NIV).

At Pentecost the divisive effects of the dispersion through language confusion (linguistic separation, due to the sin of pride) at Babel (Gen. 11:4-9) was momentarily overcome. "Jews from every nation under heaven . . . heard them speaking in his own language." (Acts 2:5-6). This underscores the decisive barrier that language is to cc ministry. We need to be able to communicate in the "heart" language of the people to be best understood. Even a riot was calmed when Jews heard Paul speak in their own tongue (Acts 22:2).

The salvation of 3,000 at Pentecost included the same cosmopolitan gathering (Acts 2:41). The church from inception has been multicultural and transcultural. The church in its final form will include those purchased by Christ's blood "from every tribe and language and people and nation." (Rev. 5:9).

The barrier to sharing the Gospel with non-Jews took extraordinary measures to overcome, including angelic visitation, visions, and providential timing (Acts 10:3, 11, 19-20). Most cultures tend toward ethnocentrism, toward a prejudicial preference of their own culture to all others. Ethnocentrism is prejudicial because the strengths of other cultures are often not appreciated. The attitude that "we are

the people" prevails. This pride is perhaps strongest among those who have the least experience with other cultures.

## **WORLDVIEW**

Culture may be defined as the particular solutions to the needs of life adopted by a group of people. It rests upon beliefs. The deepest beliefs and assumptions about the world, including values, perspectives, taboos and behaviors, constitute one's worldview. A worldview constitutes a cognitive grid through which perceptions are interpreted. Typically this worldview cannot be articulated by the holder, since it is taken for granted, and is so deeply ingrained from birth. A person wearing glasses, for instance, doesn't notice the lenses, yet they are unique to the needs of the wearer, and would not help most others to properly see.

One's worldview can be illuminated through contact with contrasting cultures. It can be judged as "right" or "wrong" by the absolute standard of the Bible. Otherwise, a culture can be judged to be relatively more or less efficient in dealing with its unique environment. Worldview can also be illuminated by the "deep structures" inherent in language. It is common wisdom that to understand a people, their language needs to be comprehended.

In trying to discover the worldview of an ethnic group, George Foster (*The image of the limited good*), advised that the method of *triangulation* be used. Possible explanations for a specific behavior, such as spending great sums for a wedding, are considered. As other "unusual" behaviors are observed, perhaps throwing an expensive party when someone prospers financially, explanations are sought which explain as many of the "unusual" behaviors as possible. That explanation, the intersection of the largest number of adequate answers to behavior, would be a key to the worldview.

## **DEGREES OF CROSS CULTURAL MINISTRY**

Acts 1:8 is suggestive of degrees in cc ministry. For a Jew, Jerusalem represents intra-cultural ministry, or ministry to one's own culture. This has been termed  $M^1$ . Judea represents one's own culture, in another locale. However, even within one's culture are pockets of those with a different subculture. In America, ministry to "hyphenated Americans" is cc in nature. So is ministry to race track personnel. Ministry in Samaria is analogous to such cc ministry. Samaritans were if intermingled Jewish/Canaanite stock, and had a paganized Judaism (2 Kings 17:26-34). "Even while these people were worshipping the Lord, they were serving their idols." (2 Kings 17:41). This is equivalent to christo-paganism, on the order of "Mariolatry" in Roman Catholicism. This is termed  $M^2$ . Usually the basic language is the same, although of a different dialect (such as Black English is to English). The  $M^3$  field is equivalent to "the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8). Language and culture are entirely different from those of the missionary. A South American missionary who goes to India is an example. Linguistic gifts are needed for  $M^3$  ministry.

Historic hostilities can increase the distance between the missionary culture and the target culture, as the Jewish/Samaritan situation, and as Whites ministering to African Americans illustrate.

## ***PRINCIPLES OF CROSS CULTURAL MINISTRY***

### **INCARNATION**

The greatest "cultural" gap ever bridged was when the eternal Logos (John 1:1) became the infant Jesus. He emptied Himself, voluntarily limiting the exercise of aspects of His divine glory (Phil. 2:6-8). Jesus, "Who being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness." (Phil. 2:6-7). This incarnational principle of cc ministry is probably the dominant model today in evangelical missions.

Jesus "did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." (Mark 10:45). Jesus, who as God was the agent of creation, became a humble member of the humanity He made (Col. 1:16). Paul wrote of such sacrifice: "Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus." (Phil. 2:5). So service is a cc way of life. Service bonds us to the recipient (2 Cor. 9:14). It creates bridges, as did the flesh of the God-man.

This identification with the "target" people was illustrated by Paul. "I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some." (1 Cor. 9:22b). "Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible." (1 Cor. 9:19).

Circumcision illustrates this principle. Paul had Timothy, who had a Jewish mother, circumcised, in order to be found acceptable to the Jews (Acts 16:3). The principle of "contextualization", or the principle of making the Gospel as relevant to a given ethnic people as possible, without compromising the biblical truth, is illustrated by this circumcision. However, accommodation to a people halts if it is in conflict with Scripture. Paul refused to circumcise Titus, so that it would not give the message that a Christian had to first observe the Law (Gal. 2:2-5). Normally circumcision is not an issue (1 Cor. 7:18-19).

Incarnational ministry is flexible, without compromise. What exactly "compromise" is has been problematic. What is the line between honoring a worshipping ancestors? Some believe that Matteo Ricci's (1552-1611) allowance of Chinese Christians praying to ancestors was compromise ("Chinese Rites Controversy", Ruth Tucker, *From Jerusalem to Irian Jaya*, Zondervan, 1983, p. 65). Hudson Taylor's fellow missionaries felt that he had gone too far by adopting Chinese dress, including "pony tail".

A missionary probably cannot completely identify with those served. This is due to differences in mother tongue, worldview, education and often economic level. Bruce Olsen, a single American, (his fine book is *Bruchko*), has in effect become a Motilone Indian, of South America. He lives exactly as they live in the jungle. Yet he is more than a Motilone, having access to education and other North American resources. Viv Grigg (*Companion to the Poor*) lived in the slums of Manila to incarnate the Gospel to the poor. However he maintains that complete cultural identification is not possible. For example, he has decided to keep his engineering credentials current, for use when needed. Once a week he was able to leave, to gain perspective, strength and Christian fellowship. This is not a criticism, but illustrates that complete identification is probably not possible.

Jonathan Bonk (*Missions and Money*, Orbis Books, 1991) made a strong case for the estrangement of missionary and host culture because of economic distance. He advises identification economically with host culture. However, if a missionary is on a par with the people, he is unable to minister, because ministry costs money, in contrast to business, which *gains* money from serving people. He will have also the power of personal networks. It is hard to deny, in any case, that a "compound" mentality puts

Crosscul.doc6

distance between missionary and national. One resolution is to live at the level of those to whom we minister *primarily*. While God is interested in the Gospel for the poor (Luke 4:18), He desires missionaries to all the world, including the middle and upper classes, something extremely difficult for a missionary who identifies with the poor. As Larry Burkett has noted, God has His people at all levels of society (whether official missionaries or not).

Ralph Winter (Center for World Mission, Pasadena, Cal.) lives on a "wartime" budget. During war, expensive airplanes and ships are purchased in order to win, while luxuries are scarce. He believes in spending whatever is needed to win the battle that a ministry faces. This may mean digital recording for a radio ministry, or a fast modem for a missionary to reduce phone costs, or a laptop computer which will withstand a harsh environment.

## ETHNOGRAPHY: Studying Cultures

When Paul visited Athens, he said, "As I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription, TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you." (Acts 17:23). Paul observed carefully. Not only that, he was alert to build a cultural bridge between the experience of the Athenians and the Gospel. Some believed Paul's method failed, but "a few" men, a woman and "a number of others" believed (Acts 17:34). Paul did not have any Old Testament scriptural base from which to operate, so the Athenians had to be brought further along than would Jews.

Ethnographic cultural observation will assist to understand a people and find points of intersection for the Gospel. Don Richards (*Peace Child*), believes that each culture has its "Redemptive Analogy", "The application of local custom to spiritual truth" (Tucker, p. 481). He found this among the Sawi tribe of Irian Jaya in their "peace child" ritual. To make the most binding peace, children from warring tribes would be exchanged. From that analogy, Christ was effectively presented as the child the Heavenly Father gave to make peace with us (p. 483).

As aids to observation, we can look for behaviors that to us are strange. We can look for patterns of behaviors and ask "Why?" (Ted Ward). Who is involved in this behavior and why are they doing it? So simple that it is overlooked, we can ask a member of the group for an explanation. Cultural informants are precious. Why, for example, do Ugandans drive so aggressively? Is this connected breaking into the head of a line of people, something considered rude by Americans? Are these behaviors, in turn, related to a "survival of the fittest" worldview, due to the slaughters led by Amin and Obote?

Research into ethnographies of the target people can be invaluable. Many are not done from a Christian perspective. Country studies published by the U.S. government are very thorough. The British publish quarterly the "Country Report", Economic Intelligence Unit, United Kingdom (HC 870 .A C68) on every nation, giving economic and political analyses. "Human Resource Area Files" extensively document many cultures, but are somewhat dated. They are now on CD Rom discs. Article data bases provide the most current information, apart from shortwave reception of national news services. Social scientists publish ethnographic articles in journals (the GN1 Library of Congress number area) such as *Ethnology*, *American Anthropologist*, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, *International Journal of Cross-cultural Relations*, *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, *Journal of Ethnic Studies* and many others.

Crosscul.doc7

Encyclopedias exist which detail aspects of cultures, such as the *Dictionary of Race and Ethnic Relations* (1994), and those which detail even aspects of a culture, as the *Encyclopedia of African American Religion* (1993). Northwestern University at Chicago, Illinois, U.S.A. has devoted one floor of a library wing to "Africana". Dissertations and theses, as well as books, are other sources.

Cross cultural ministry is like picking one's way through a mine field. With great care we probe for the mines, knowing that a situation may blow up in our face if we are careless. So we need to watch where the nationals walk, even where the pets walk, so reading cultural clues and cues. How are people reacting? Why are they reacting like they are? But hopefully we learn from errors and improve. To adapt to a people requires unusual flexibility and humility. Such ministry is demands competent, intelligent and gifted servants of God, not as some think, those who can't make it in other kinds of work or ministry.

## RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

The quintessence of Christian ministry is personal relationships with those we seek to serve. James Engel, a Christian expert in communication, developed a model which places the acceptance of the messenger before the acceptance of the Gospel. A good relationship precedes the most effective evangelism, although there have been exceptions, since the Holy Spirit is not limited. A strong relationship is almost essential for discipleship.

A trust bond develops slowly, and is earned by attempting to be faithful. It may take years to develop a reputation for being trustworthy. This is the case even for pastors. Mayers and Josh McDowell, among others, begin with self-acceptance as the basis of strong, positive relationships with others. Mayers advocates the attitude which recognizes that we all are "under construction" (Mayers, p. 37-38). Co-dependency is characterized by trying to find a base of self-acceptance through the perception of how others treat us. If we can accept ourself, for this moment, with our flaws, we can more easily accept the flawed (Mayers). McDowell came to not simply accept, but to be thankful for an alcoholic father and obese mother, because God did not err. God used difficulty to develop McDowell into a speaker who has talked to more college students, he claims, than any other person alive. Because God is good, we can trust our past, present and future to Him. We can afford to be thankful (1 Thess. 5:18; Phil. 4:4), because God can turn evil into good for the believer (Rom. 8:28). When I do not need the approval of others, and do not fear them, I am free to love them, since love casts out fear (1 John 4:18).

Personal strength comes from God. King David wrote, "When I felt secure, I said, 'I will never be shaken.' O Lord, when you favored me, you made my mountain stand firm; but when you hid your face, I was dismayed." (Ps. 30:6-7). Prayer gives us personal stability. Personal acceptance can be based upon the acceptance of God. "Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God." (Rom. 15:7).

From a basis of self-acceptance ("Love your neighbor as yourself." Luke 10:27), we can love others. "Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins." This love covers cross cultural conflict. Love must operate behind any Christian ministry. Otherwise our sacrifice means nothing (1 Cor. 13:1-3). When God loved, He gave (John 3:16). An Indian was asked his memory of a missionary among his people. "He loved us very much. He loved us very much. Yes, very much he loved us." Love *considers* others to be more important than we are, showing honor (Phil. 2:3). The principle of servanthood holds across cultures, that the greatest is servant of all (Matt. 23:11). As a former missionary to Irian Jaya put it, "Love finds a way."

"Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work." (Eccles. 4:9). Jesus sent out the 12 and the 70 by two's (Mark 6:7; Luke 10:1). Two not only lightens the load, but makes the load light (Matt. 11:28-30). Additionally, since Christians specialize in ministry, we need to both assist other Christians in their ministry and call upon them to assist us in ministry to others (see *The Urban Christian*, by Ray Bakke, InterVarsity Press).

### ***CROSS CULTURAL TEACHING***

Various ethnic groups have dominant learning styles. A common division is "field dependent" and field "independent. The former style is group-oriented, with emphasis upon the student-teacher relationship, as well as visually oriented. Independent study and a cognitive orientation characterizes the latter style. Being aware of these styles, it is probably better to teach to it, rather than use the opposite style.

Additionally, gender-based thinking style research shows females to be right-brained, emphasizing global thinking and the visual, while left-brain dominant males are more linear, analytic and segmented in their thinking, typically.

To adequately relate specific teaching to another culture, the teacher may use the "Five Steps to Intercultural Teaching" process, available from the writer.