
PART THREE

THE PRACTICE OF MISSION

5 MISSION AND CULTURE

Bill Cotton

The greatest task of the missionary is to become an effective *communicator*. Poor man, he proceeds from his own monocultural situation and seeks to cross into another culture in which he is expected to communicate the gospel powerfully, so as to convince the locals of the truth of his message.

I was in an art gallery in the city of La Paz, Bolivia. Explaining some aspects of the pictures to a friend, a Bolivian lady approached me and said: 'I wish I could speak English half as well as you speak Spanish.' I replied, perhaps a little smugly, 'I have to speak Spanish well, for my business is to communicate the greatest News.'

Little did I realise then that communicating the gospel in another culture is infinitely more than speaking the language. Yet I suppose most of us who went out to foreign fields twenty-five years ago from Brethren assemblies had not the slightest awareness of the difficulties and dangers of cross-cultural communication. As far as I can recall no-one ever warned me of the nature of cultural disparity.

The baggage we take with us

Culture is a complex of beliefs, feelings and values which characterize a particular group of people. We are soaked in these values from childhood, and are hardly aware that we have them, they have become so much a part of our essential being. The beliefs common to our culture, many of them in Britain influenced to some extent by the gospel, provide life's foundations and help to give us a sense of security. We control our feelings in a certain way common to our culture, and we have certain moral and cultural values dictated by it.

We take this way of looking at life, of emotional reactions, of value-judgements with us to the mission field. We cannot do otherwise. What we often don't realize is that we also take with us an often unarticulated idea that our culture is the best of all cultures. Ours is a superior culture.

Two examples. When an Amazonian Indian asked a Wycliffe translator: 'If your God is so great, how come he doesn't speak our language?' he was simply expressing the view that the world revolves around his tribe. That's where any true God would logically have begun his work. At the other extreme I met two American Peace Corps youth returning from the Bolivian tin mines. What did they do up there? 'We taught them how to play baseball.' They thus expressed their beliefs in their cultural superiority on the playing field.

The Christian missionary takes another element of baggage with him—his theological system. He takes a Bible in one hand and a volume of theology (Berkhof, Strong, Hodge) in the other. He may have learnt it in his local church or at Bible College, but it is essentially 'Made in Britain, USA, etc'. He has learnt this painstakingly and expects when he gets off the plane to be communicating it within as short a time as possible. Little does he realize that his message sounds foreign, at best paternalistic, at worst imperialistic.

We must examine the baggage we take with us to the mission field. How far is it British, and how far is it essentially Christian? This was the question which caused me a considerable amount of mental distress after seeing our first conversions in Bolivia. We must strip our message of any element which does not belong to the essence of the gospel. Paul realized that the attempt of the Judaizers to impose circumcision on the infant churches would strangle his work, and he fought tenaciously against it.

Learning from another culture

Deep humility is essential to the missionary task. The missionary must listen and learn. The people to whom he goes love their own culture. They believe it to be superior to all others. This may at times cause him frustration or even anger, but he will have to bite his lip and accept it.

Hernán was a 13-year-old school boy who did some gardening for me during my first year in Bolivia. He would fairly frequently remind me of Bolivian superiority. His logic worked like this: 'When a Yankee's car breaks down he buys a new part to replace the old. In Bolivia we can't afford a new part, so we invent something makeshift to replace it. So we are more ingenious than they are. Q.E.D.' One day I had occasion to open the back of one of the old reel-to-reel tape recorders. He stared at the mass of coloured wires, resistances, etc, gave a long, low whistle and muttered: 'Qué gringos!' For once he confessed himself beaten.

What an immense amount of differences the new missionary is

confronted with. Food, houses, language, even greeting patterns. The North American says 'Hi!', rarely a handshake. The Englishman gives you a cold handshake, assuming he hasn't seen you for some time. The Bolivian salutes you with a handshake followed by a bear-hug, followed by another handshake. The Argentine prefers the kiss, even among men. Kissing rarely-washed, oily-skinned adolescents is not the most pleasant of experiences. What a difference in the concept of time.

On the way to the flat in which we first held meetings my path took me through a public plaza. There I found Carlos, a new Christian from the University, sitting on a park bench. Lacking only five minutes for the beginning of the service, I suggested we walk down together. 'Oh no', he said, 'I never go anywhere on time.' He was clearly flustered by my suggestion, and for the first time I realized that the habit of arriving late was not due to carelessness, but to principle'. To arrive somewhere on time would be positively rude. Carlos is now the president of Scripture Union in Bolivia.

Our addiction to time may be positively offensive in the culture to which we go. So may our addiction to the automobile. Some missionaries cannot imagine life without the wheel. They plead efficiency and will do everything possible to obtain a car or jeep. In some cases this might be justified, but I suspect less often than we imagine. In 13 years in Bolivia I did not own private transport, so was thrown into the public transport system which is used by 95%+ of the people. How many excellent opportunities this gave me for conversation and for being thrown into personal contact with ordinary people.

Becoming a bicultural person means coming to love the culture to which one goes. Obviously learning the language will be the first necessity and the native will see this as the primary symbol of identification. But loving the culture is much more than learning the language. How can this be achieved? Perhaps by adapting Paul's words to this situation:

*Whatever is true, whatever is noble,
whatever is right, whatever is pure,
whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—
—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—
—think about such things. Phil 4:8*

In any culture there is that which is commendable, and we should dwell upon it; make much of it; commend it to others.

One of the most delightful touches in Bolivian culture was one practised in the restaurant. As one passed between the tables to reach one's seat, you would slightly incline the head at each table and say, 'Buen provecho', which means something like, 'Good eating', or, 'May it do you good'. The people at the table will reply, 'Gracias'. The same ritual is performed as you leave the restaurant. On more than one occasion I have been asked, 'How do you say "buen provecho" in English?' On replying that we have no such custom, a negative reaction is inevitable!

Pity the poor new missionary. His reactions during the first few months are crucial. *Culture shock* is primarily negative reaction to a new culture and almost always occurs during these first crucial months. He is thrown off his guard by the most unsuspected factors. He is disorientated. I well remember wandering around a market looking for gravy powder and custard powder. I was shocked to find none. How can one live, possibly the rest of one's life, without gravy and custard?

When culture shock is compounded with the inevitable disparity between expectations (he was going to evangelize the country within six months!) and performance (long years of earlier missionary work have produced little results) he may well experience a rejection of the culture. The fact is that finding fault with the culture is simply a symptom of our own inability to understand it, to come to terms with it. The missionary will then either resign, return home, or remain on the field by settling in to a minimal routine. He will develop an instinctive distrust of the nationals, and will either ignore or denigrate his receptor culture.

We were visiting a fellow missionary. It was a national festival day, so we were going out to the country for the day. As we were leaving the house we pointed out to the missionary that he had not put out the national flag as custom requires. He hurried back in, returned with the flag, and said as he hung it up over the front of the house, 'I always believe in respecting their silly festivals.' The adjective said it all! On another occasion we received a visit from a missionary in Chile. They were having a tough time of raising national churches, but then, 'The Chileans are a very lazy people. It really was impossible to get them to do anything of their own initiative. They always needed to be spoonfed by the missionaries.' Some hours later we were talking about the phenomenal growth of Pentecostal groups in Chile. Yes, they were to be found in every town and village, and worked hard at proclaiming the gospel. Were they led by missionaries? No, they were entirely led by Chileans.

As Eugene Nida has pointed out, the missionary bears with him a paramessage. Alongside his spoken word goes a message expressed in looks, gestures, and reactions, by which the national senses his attitude toward their culture. 'I never did like that [black] girl to touch me', says the social worker, Miss Ophelia, in Uncle Tom's Cabin, 'but I never realised that she knew it.' How many missionaries suffer from the Miss Ophelia syndrome! The trouble is that they do know it, and they resent it.

We must by all means possible strive to eradicate from ourselves and from those we send out to the field all vestiges of cultural superiority. We must inculcate a spirit of humility and a willingness to learn from other cultures.

The gospel in cultural terms

Contextualisation is a word widely used in mission studies today. In a sense

every Bible-loving Christian is already a bicultural person. He has imbibed something of that culture which greets us in the pages of the Bible. It is different from his own and he has learnt, to some extent, to be a bridge between these two cultures. If he has been honest in his understanding of the biblical gospel, he will have become critical of some aspects of his own culture.

Conversion brings with it a fairly radical shift in world view. It is experienced to some extent by every Christian in every culture. If the outgoing missionary has developed this faculty he will be more able to restate the gospel in terms beyond those of his own culture.

As he immerses himself into the receptor culture, he will begin to look for thought-forms and sentiments which are acceptable among these people, which will become vehicles for sharing his faith and the biblical revelation. Again I must confess that on going to the mission field 24 years ago, one was not made aware of this. For the first few years one's teaching and preaching were clothed, unconsciously perhaps, in an entirely European, not to say British, dress.

How then may one avoid this? Is it not demanding a Herculean task, before which most prospective missionaries will draw back? I do not think so. There are, I think, two ways in which the missionary can contextualise his thinking and his preaching: social intercourse and reading. The first of these is available to all, though some will find it easier than others. By constant conversation with the people, by asking questions, by probing into the meaning of customs, by sharing in the things that the people do, the missionary will become sensitive to what moves his receptor culture.

Reading, assuming that there is a fairly high standard of literacy in the culture, will introduce him to the mind of the people as expressed by those who are most able to know it at first hand. I know of nothing which has given me as good an understanding of the typical Spanish village as Miguel de Unamuno's short story, 'San Miguel Bueno, Mártir'.

The gospel as a critique of all cultures

'It must be noted that Christianity, if it is not hopelessly denatured, never becomes fully at home in any culture. Always, when it is true to its genius, it creates a tension.' (Latourette) There are demonic and dehumanizing forces present in all cultures.

How will the missionary be able to recognize these? Only if his own mind is steeped in the truth of scripture. Constant personal encounter with God's Word therein, guided by the impulse of the Spirit, will enable him to discover what is truly right and righteous in his own culture, and what on the other hand is devilish or carnal. When he has got through with his own culture he might be able to do the same with the receptor culture.

Probably a more direct route is for him to ensure that the mind of his fellow Christians in this receptor culture are steeped in scripture by their own first-hand encounter with it. Who better able to discern what is good and godly in their society, and what is not? Let him develop his theology direct from a personal and continuous encounter with God's Word written, and through that with God's Word living. The results may sometimes be surprising, but if his theology is truly biblical he will come up with something very like it, though perhaps robed in a garb which may seem strange to him at first sight.

Finally the key to all this discussion of 'Mission and Culture' is *Incarnation*. As the Son of God became truly incarnate in the receptor culture to which he went—a Jewish carpenter's home in disreputable Nazareth, occupied by Roman imperialism—so we are called to incarnate ourselves and our gospel in that culture to which God's Spirit calls us.