

Effective Cross-Cultural Ministry

Mark Jordan Farnham

Since the time America began sending out missionaries to other lands there has been concern about culture. For many years Western culture and the gospel seemed to go hand in hand. American missionaries were expected to go to a foreign country, convert the heathen, and then teach them to dress, look, speak and act like "civilized" Americans. The missionary was expected to spend most of his life with the people because without him the nationals would surely not survive spiritually. When the missionary was on furlough, he would show his slides that showcased the nationals all dressed in western attire and learning English. The very next slide would show a heathen national still dressed in his cultural attire and needing to be converted to the "white man's gospel." Although the norm has been to Westernize while reaching the lost, missions need to focus on spreading Christianity in a culture while maintaining it as much as possible.

Culture has been defined in many ways. Almost every definition includes the way people think, act, or the environment in which they live. "Culture is the set of rules which each particular group of human beings designs and mutually accepts as its own style of life."¹ Archibald Baker defines culture simply as "the outcome of human activity to satisfy needs and desires."² So far culture is seen as a set of rules, rarely written, that is the norm for every day life. It is also seen as a pattern developed around needs. A practice that meets those needs over time becomes part of the culture. A more thorough definition is given by Lingenfelter.

Culture is basically a set of conceptual tools that people use to adapt to their environment and to order their lives in the pursuit of food, shelter, and family and community relationships. Each culture is the product of peculiar historical forces that have served to define a people's uniqueness and their personal and group identities.³

The culture of a people is most noticeable in their dress, mannerisms, language, and diet. However, culture goes much deeper than surface traits. The way people think and believe is different from one culture group to the next. Surface traits are a result of the beliefs and thought patterns. Culture is passed from one generation to the next from parent to child. A child learns as he grows that in order to be socially accepted he must behave a certain way. A culture then provides identity and security to its people.

Four general characteristics describe a culture: language, manners, behavior, and thinking. Language includes not only the spoken language of the group but its slang, idioms, tone, written word, and dialects. When a missionary seeks to reach a culture for Christ, language is the most difficult and most important hurdle. "In the early months, nothing matters like language learning. This is the foundation of your whole ministry . . . It is possible to get along with very little. But few people that do that become effective evangelists and still fewer become effective teachers."⁴ One author notes five stages of language learning. Most missionaries never get past the third stage which is simple conversation with limited vocabulary. This lack of communication hurts the missionary's attempts to evangelize. Few missionaries see the language as top priority in their training. When a missionary can master a language he opens himself up to many areas of opportunity to reach and disciple the foreign nationals.

One approach to the language problem has been to teach the foreign nationals English instead of learning their language. From other than an educational standpoint this is a supreme waste of time and effort. First, it is much easier for one family to learn a language than it is for an entire village or culture to learn one. Second, with this approach, one must always teach English before one can teach the gospel, slowing efforts down immensely. Lastly, many cultures will reject one who cannot communicate to them in their own language.

When a missionary dedicates himself to learning and mastering the language of the culture in which he will be ministering, he does himself a good deed. "From the viewpoint of the national, the language learning labor expended by the missionary is one of the most obvious acts of love and commitment he could offer to the people."⁵ A fluently spoken gospel is one of the missionary's most powerful tools in reaching a culture.

The second general characteristic of a culture is its manners. This encompasses all the mannerisms, gestures, facial expressions, and peculiarities that are common to that culture. For example, waving, touching another's head, rolling the eyes all have significant meanings in

some cultures. These specifics are offensive in one culture while in another they may be expected. The wise missionary will pay close attention to detail and learn as quickly as possible all the various oddities of a culture to avoid giving offense.

Gestures are the one universal language which every tribe and nation understands. For these reasons then gestures are of supreme importance. The expression on the face, the tone of the voice, the tilt of the nose, in brief, the way in which anything is done is recognized as being of as much significance as the deed itself, and therefore serves as an integral part of the stimulus, in influencing other people's conduct.⁶

Carelessness in this area can greatly hinder efforts. A missionary who repeatedly offends in these small areas risks being totally rejected. In James 2:10 one who keeps the law is guilty of all because he offends in one point. So it is with cross-cultural ministry. A missionary can introduce a "gesture of conflict" that will cause more hurt to his ministry than the good he does otherwise. These gestures of conflict have been interpreted as "stimuli to resistance and self-preservation rather than to conversion or to education; and so it will continue until the gesture of conflict is removed."⁷

A third characteristic of culture is activity. This includes social relationships, ways of doing things, patterns of behavior, what is of value, and customs. Traditions are formed because these activities have always been done a certain way or because environment and geography dictate it so. Some practices stem from value systems or chain of command. A foreign national may have many wives because it is the normal practice or because it is how one gains authority and leadership. A culture may move around a lot because of weather patterns and agricultural needs. Whatever influences behavior and customs needs to be understood by the missionary.

The fourth characteristic of culture is thinking. Much research has been done in the past two decades on cognitive patterns. Researchers have found that cultures think in such a different way from others that it is no wonder that miscommunication occurs so often. Even if one was fluent in a language does not mean that he could communicate well to people that understand that language. "It is not enough to adapt your behavior and your speaking. If at all possible, you want to learn to think in the way of the people with whom you are living."⁸

Some cultures think in terms of time and scheduling while others think in terms of events. Details are important to some people and useless to others. In most non-Western cultures personal relationships are valued more highly while productivity and accomplishing tasks is secondary. A missionary must recognize a difference in thinking and adapt his evangelizing and discipling accordingly. Failure to do this will result in criticism directed toward the receiver for not understanding. Marvin Mayers puts it this way: "Little did I realize that an attack on one aspect of life is seen as an attack on the whole; a criticism of a thought pattern is a criticism of the entire person."⁹

Edward Hall sums up culture by observing ten primary message systems found in every culture. Each one fits under one of the four general characteristics of a culture. They are: language, temporality (the attitude toward time, routine, and schedule), territoriality (space, property), exploitation (the methods of control, the use and sharing of resources), association (family, kin, community) subsistence (work, division of labor), bisexuality (differing modes of speech, dress, conduct), learning (observation, modeling instruction), play (humor, games), and defense (health procedures, social conflicts, beliefs).¹⁰

It is only when a missionary fully understands culture that he can minister most effectively. Taking the knowledge about culture, he can apply it to his particular culture in which he is working. There are positive and negative ways to minister cross-culturally. No amount of training beforehand can prepare one for a change of culture. From the moment one steps off the plane or boat, crosses the border, or opens his eyes, culture shock is bound to happen. The sight of masses of people in India, the heat of Africa, or the backwards lifestyle of Amazon jungle tribes hits the arriving missionary like a brick wall. Everything is different; everyone speaks a different language; everyone stares. It is imperative that the missionary compose himself and adapt as soon as possible.

Culture shock has been described as "that emotional disturbance which results from adjustment to a new cultural environment. Its cause is the loss of the familiar cues by which we interact in any society."¹¹ The missionary will feel bewildered and confused until he adjusts to the culture. If a missionary has never been on this particular field before, he will likely pass through four stages of culture shock: fascination, hostility, superiority, and finally adjustment.¹²

Although culture shock is to be initially expected, it must not be allowed to remain too long. Many a missionary family has had to return to

the States after a few months because of the inability of one member to adjust. It is almost impossible to minister to people who know you are shocked, repulsed, or resentful of their culture. The best way to minimize culture shock is to spend some time on the field before moving permanently. Even a visit of one or two weeks allows the missionary to experience some of the feelings and fears he will have later. The visit acts as a buffer to absorb the shock of adjustment. If there is any aspect of the culture that is particularly troubling, he will be able to plan how to deal with it before he moves.

If the missionary can grasp the concept of culture shock he will be able to handle it better. It would be good for a prospective missionary to research culture shock and to break it down in his mind so when it happens he will be able to think it through and respond properly. A simple definition will help to understand culture shock. "Culture shock has to do with ambiguity in understanding the responses to cultural stimuli."¹³ This definition analyzes shock and makes it understandable. It is simply a problem of ambiguity which over time can be corrected by learning.

In addition to culture shock, there are other factors and attitudes that a missionary must be conscious of in order to effectively minister. Paternalism is the attitude of superiority that manifests itself in activity that belittles another. "When we fail to recognize that adults of a different culture are adults in their own right and that to them much of *our* behavior seems childish, we ooze a disgusting superiority complex which is a serious stumbling block to purposeful communication."¹⁴ Too often a missionary will view a foreign national's lack of western knowledge as a lack of any knowledge. What he does not realize is that he is the one who lacks knowledge of the culture in which he now lives. He must remind himself constantly to put the foreign national on the same level as himself. He must evaluate his attitude, manners, and words to find and get rid of any type of superiority. "Superiority is especially deadly, for it subtly generates contempt, an incorrigible attitude for a missionary."¹⁵

It is common for two people who speak different languages to regard each other as unintelligent. The language is a barrier preventing communication. It is easy to evaluate someone's intelligence when time is spent communicating. To a new missionary it will seem at first that everyone he ministers to is unintelligent. This not only happens because of lack of communication but also because of a failure to understand how the other person thinks, his mentality. "Mentality is not to be confused with intelligence. Intelligence is ability to think and learn. Mentality is a way or manner of thinking and learning. It deals with thought processes, not

mental capacity."¹⁶ The missionary must be extremely careful not to exhibit paternalism while ministering.

Another negative attitude that is found in cross-cultural ministry is the tendency to proselytism. Proselytism in this context refers to the act of converting someone to the gospel *and* to the culture of the missionary. This attitude forces the new convert to abandon his original culture in order to be "Christianized." The missionary's culture and the gospel are so tightly bound that they seem inseparable.

Proselytism consists of those activities by means of which a person is persuaded to transfer his allegiance from one leader or group, with their special beliefs and practices to another. This is precisely what the church has considered itself commanded to do in the great commission. It is held in high esteem, or is abominated, according as the individual proselytized is considered to be a convert or a pervert.¹⁷

Anyone who believes that a convert should totally give up his culture does not understand the importance of culture. The best witnesses a missionary has are those who are saved and retain as much of their culture as the Bible allows. All cultural practices should pass the biblical test. If it is not a matter of sin or violation of principle, it can be retained. A missionary must see the worth of culture in reaching his field. More cultures have rejected the gospel because of proselytism than we realize. The problem is that western missionaries have failed to see the implications from the viewpoint of the receivers.

The missionary rejoices that a brand has been plucked from the flaming fire; the home church in the USA enthusiastically adopts the support of this courageous young man who has 'forsaken all' for his faith; the villagers symbolically bury an old pair of Halim's sandals in retribution against a despicable outcast who dared to reject all societal norms and accepted a foreigner's religion where adherents eat filthy pig meat and worship three gods.¹⁸

When one looks at proselytism from this side, it is an ugly thing indeed. Taking culture away from a convert leaves him confused with divided loyalties between the "man who has given him God" and his own people. Such a burden need not be placed on any convert. If a missionary will

constantly evaluate his message, he will be able to avoid carrying over cultural baggage with the gospel.

A fourth negative aspect is rejection. It is often the result of the first three aspects. For whatever reason there will always be some who reject the missionary. They will reject him because he is new or because he is a foreigner or because he seemingly disrupts life as it was before he arrived. This kind of rejection cannot be prevented. It is a natural bias against change. The only thing the missionary can do for this person is to pray for him. To lessen the chances of rejection, the missionary can demonstrate true acceptance of the foreign nationals. This will soften the rejection somewhat, as foreign nationals see consistent acts of acceptance to themselves and their culture.

Rejection not only occurs because the missionary is new but also because he is different. "Often people who are so different become frustrated with one another and even reject one another, to the point that it is impossible for them to work together effectively."¹⁹ Rejection can be overcome by magnifying similarities (sinfulness of all men, love of Christ for all) and minimizing the differences.

Positively, there are several ways missionaries can maximize the effectiveness of their work. The first is by discerning between scriptural commands and cultural practices. He must be able to see what is scriptural and what is a matter of Christian liberty in culture. "Where Scripture does not address itself either in precept or principle, directly or indirectly, the missionary can certainly refrain from trying to introduce any change. He is not primarily an agent of cultural change."²⁰ For example, is it unscriptural to only have one four hour church service a week since the foreign nationals have to come from miles away? Is it a matter of cultural freedom to translate "seals" instead of "lamb" in the Arctic outreaches? The missionary needs to have his beliefs set in stone about what is truly in the Bible and what is a Western interpretation. "We all have our own cultural understanding about the way things ought to be; this is quite normal. But until we begin to understand that things can be different without being right or wrong, our cross-cultural learning will be hampered."²¹

As a missionary begins to seek out this matter he will be quite surprised. So much American culture has been superimposed on the Bible that one naturally accepts it as truth. This is not entirely bad. Americans need to practice Biblical truth in an American way; but they need to understand what is Bible and what is their culture.

Once the missionary can discern between culture and Bible he can move toward his goal: the transformation of the souls of men and not their culture. Because of the change that takes place in a convert, some things will change. Those parts of the culture which violate Biblical commands or principles must be given up. Too often missionaries try to change the culture without introducing change to the soul. The result is that the missionary is seen as offensive and an enemy to their very existence. It is no wonder that some groups reject a missionary and resent his presence among them.

Instead the missionary's aim should be to make disciples. As the converts grow in grace they will see the parts of their culture that are sinful and voluntarily dispose of them. It is then their choice and not the missionary's. This is easier for those unconverted foreign nationals to accept. In this way the change that is introduced by the missionary is minimal.

This approach takes a careful analysis of all methods used. Will this program or technique change the culture or the soul? Will the change be made by the missionary or the foreign national? Change will come to a culture that is evangelized, there is no doubt.

Missionaries are professional agents of change. They are not intent on changing culture, but they seek primarily a spiritual change. That change influences all areas of life of the individual and society. Moral change immediately follows spiritual change. Then a multitude of social relationships, economic practices, and cultural patterns find themselves influenced by the initial movement.²²

Thirdly, effective cross-cultural ministry takes place when true Christianity is lived and propagated by the foreign nationals in their own culture. When a missionary can plant a church, disciple converts, and train a few men to be leaders and one to be the pastor, he has effectively ministered cross-culturally. He can leave that place and move on to another. The church is strong and it grows because it is self-supporting, self-governing, and will plant other churches. A culture is reached when it no longer needs foreign missionaries to come in and establish churches.

The missionary's main goal should be to plant churches. This philosophy allows the foreign nationals to feel that the gospel is their possession to give out to others rather than something to be given to them. Because it is their own people that run the church, the unconverted will be more eager to listen and attend. It will not be seen as "the American's religion" but "our religion."

Lastly, the missionary's best method for ministering in another culture is to immerse himself in that culture as best he can. "You should seek to identify yourself as closely as possible with the people you serve, so as to remove every possible hindrance from their attending to the gospel and following it."²³ This means the missionary will adapt as much of the culture as is Biblical and practical. He may not wear the same clothes, but he will not be offensive with what he does wear. Blending in with the foreign nationals usually facilitates acceptance. The more he can reduce cultural clash, the greater will be his effectiveness.

Although the norm has been to mix the gospel and the culture of the missionary, the best missions work is accomplished using the culture of the receivers. This takes an understanding of culture and all the factors involved. It also requires an understanding of what not to do and what to do in ministering cross-culturally. When a missionary fully grasps the importance of culture in his work, he will be an effective minister in the culture he reaches.

1 Peter C. Wagner, *Frontiers in Missionary Strategy* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1971), 87.

2 Archibald G. Baker, *Christian Missions and a New World Culture* (Chicago: Willett, Clark and Co., 1934), 37.

3 Sherwood G. Lingenfelter and Marvin K. Mayers, *Ministering Cross-Culturally* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1986), 122.

4 Michael C. Griffiths, *Give Up Your Small Ambitions* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1970), 112.

5 J. Raymond Tallman, *An Introduction to World Missions* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1989), 157.

6 Baker, 52.

7 Ibid., 58.

8 Griffiths, 106.

9 Marvin K. Mayers, *Christianity Confronts Culture* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan 1974), 43.

10 Lingenfelter, 27.

11 William A. Smalley, "Emotional Storm Signals: The Shocks of Culture,

- Language, Self-Discovery," *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* (Spring 1966) 2:146.
- 12 Missionary Methods: Candidate Seminar Manual #2 Baptist Mid-Missions Cleveland, Ohio, 22.
- 13 Tallman, 155.
- 14 Wagner, 98.
- 15 Neil Gallagher, *Don't Go Overseas Until You've Read This Book* (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, Inc., 1977), 83.
- 16 Edward C. Pentecost, *Issues in Missiology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1982), 92.
- 17 Baker, 57.
- 18 Morris A. Inch, *Doing Theology Across Cultures* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1982), 74.
- 19 Lingenfelter, 45.
- 20 Pentecost, 145.
- 21 Paul Borthwick, *A Mind for Missions* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1987), 90.
- 22 Pentecost, 136.
- 23 Harold R. Cook, *Missionary Life and Work* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1959), 63.