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The Gospels and Cultural Adaptation in Mission

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I Missions in light of cultural diversity

The diversity among people groups and cultures is, according to the biblical witness, not principally a consequence of sin. Rather, it is desired by God. The diversity and variety between cultures is mentioned in the early chapters of the Bible, which lay the foundation for the teaching on sin found in the entire Holy Scriptures, and is not to be understood negatively as a consequence of sin. This diversity is also not to be understood as a consequence of God's judgment that confused languages at the building of the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1-9). By confusing languages, God wanted to achieve exactly what prior thereto he had given to mankind as a command, namely the spreading of humanity over the entire earth ('fill the earth', Gen. 1:28; 9:1).

This brought about the division of humanity into a multitude of families and peoples as well as occupations, abilities, and cultures.

With the building of the Tower of Babel, the establishment of a world culture was sought, which has since then always been the goal of Satan. This is seen in the book of Revelation and in the person of the Anti-Christ in the New Testaments. This is what is said of the 'beast,' which has his power from the 'dragon' (Rev. 13:1-10): 'He was given power to make war...[and]...was given authority over every tribe, people, language and nation...' God, on the other hand, wants neither a united world city nor a united world government nor a united world humanism. God and his Word guarantee the unity of the world without a visible structure on earth. God 'scattered' mankind 'over the face of the whole earth' (Gen. 11:9).

From the sons of Noah came 'the people who were scattered over the earth' and the 'nations' spread out

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(Gen. 10:5). For this reason, the formation of individual peoples via family trees can be explained (Gen. 10:1-32), and at the end of such explanation, it is said that 'from these the nations spread out over the earth after the flood' (Gen. 10:32). God is therefore the creator of all peoples, because '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' (Acts 17:26; similarly, Dt. 32:8; Psalm 74:17).

Christians are people who are freed from all cultural bondage. They no longer have to recognize human traditions and commandments next to God's commandments. This is made particularly clear in Mark 7:1-13, where Jesus strongly criticises the Pharisees because they had elevated their human culture to the level of God's binding commandments. However, Christians can judge other cultures in the light of the Bible only if they have learned to discern between their own culture, even if it is a pious culture, and the commandments of God that cross over cultural bounds.

Mark 7:1-13 again is the best starting point for looking at this issue. Very reputable and pious motives prompted the Pharisees to enact supplemental guidelines binding for everyone in addition to, and even against, God's Word. Jesus vehemently criticizes the Pharisees, because they have thereby made themselves into law-givers next to God: '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' (Mark 7:7; Mt. 15:9). Because Christians belong solely to

Christ and are solely subordinate to his Word, they cannot look at their own culture and the cultures of others only critically. Rather, they are obliged out of love to be attuned to others' cultures.

In I Corinthians 9:19-23, Paul establishes the necessity to be attuned to others' cultures when conducting evangelization with the very point that he is free with respect to all men:

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. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.

It is apparent that a Christian can live in his own culture in such a manner that he does not notice one of two results—that in the best case he is misunderstood, and in the worst case, he is a hindrance (1 Cor. 9,12) to others to understand the gospel. Christians are therefore not only responsible to see to it that the message of salvation through Christ is proclaimed. They are also responsible to see to it that the message of salvation through Christ can be understood. That is why the

Bible is able to be translated into every conceivable language, and the gospel can and should be expressed in every dialect and cultural form.

World missions do not bypass the preexisting sociological facts. Rather, missions strategy orients itself by them. For this reason, Paul started churches in metropolitan areas and centres of commerce and transportation. He left it to these churches to penetrate the surrounding areas. Paul himself started new churches in areas that had not been reached with the gospel. He mostly started churches in centrally located cities, soon installed elders whom he had trained, and then soon moved to other locations. He left the entire penetration of the region to the churches in the cities. Regarding the church in Thessalonica the following is said,

And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. The Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia—your faith in God has become known everywhere. Therefore we do not need to say anything about it.... (1 Thess. 1:7-8).

II A Comparison with the Koran

For Christians it goes without saying that the Holy Scriptures may be translated into every language and that missions work does not consist of reading out holy texts in their original language(s). Even the Sunday sermon and every form of proclamation of 'God's Word' within Christianity are based on the idea that a read Bible text requires

commentary for the hearer. The earlier Lutheran and pietistic saying that in worship one goes 'under the Word' and that it is the responsibility of the one preaching to proclaim 'God's Word' is not honoured by simply using, as close to the original as possible, as many and long Bible texts as possible. Rather, it is important to speak the message of the Bible as relevantly and as understandably as possible into the life of the hearers.

We have seen that this sign of the Christian faith is addressed, even required, by the Holy Scriptures. Jesus and Paul proclaim the Word of God by propagating its content in new forms, not by simply reading out existing texts. In Acts 17:16-34, we find an outstanding example of how one can express Old Testament and New Testament contents in the language and thought of another culture.

A comparison of the Bible and the Koran makes it evident that this idea is not self-evident for a holy scripture. Koran Arabic is unique in its sound and has fascinated millions, and it is very difficult to translate. However, this Arabic text solely remains 'god's word', and for this reason millions of Muslims pray their daily prayers in this holy language, which most of them naturally do not understand. Alongside this is the fact that for hundreds of years, the Koran was not allowed to be translated. It was not until the twentieth century, in the course of missionary and political awakening, that the Koran was translated by Muslims themselves and disseminated. It is to be noted that every translation of the Koran is viewed as a commentary and not as 'god's word'.

Comparison of the Understanding of Inspiration between the Bible and the Koran, i.e., the Understanding within Islam¹

Bible	Koran
God and man are both authors.	God alone is the author.
God is committed to His own Word.	God is not bound to his word; rather, he is sovereign over it.
Reflects the human personality of the authors	Has nothing to do with personality
Many and varied authorship	No human author; only a recipient
Large literary variety ²	Practically a uniform style
No perfection in the language used	Perfection in the language used
No holy language; multiple languages used	Holy language
Obligation to translate	Translation is for all intents and purposes not possible.
Textual criticism is allowed and is a part of history.	Textual criticism has not been allowed and has been suppressed.
Textual critical versions printed	Uniformity of transmission stated by belief
Created over thousands of years	Revealed in the matter of a few years
Contains many details about its historical origin	Contains practically no historical details regarding its origin
Many historical details (e.g., chronologies, geography)	Scant concrete historical details

¹ Details in Thomas Schirmmacher, *Koran und Bibel* (Hänsler: Neuhausen, 2009) (English translation forthcoming).

² Comp. Thomas Schirmmacher, *Die Vielfalt biblischer Sprache: Über 100 alt- und neutestamentliche Stilarten, Ausdrucksweisen, Redeweisen und Gliederungsformen* (*The Diversity of Biblical Language: Over 100 Old and New Testament Types of Style, Expression, Modes of Speaking and Tactical Forms*) (Bonn: VKW, 1997¹; 2001²).

III The Recipients of the Four Gospels

In the following, we will attempt to demonstrate that the Bible, with the incredible fact that it contains the life story of the founder of Christianity in quadruplicate, at the same time thereby provides testimony to the necessity that the gospel has to be proclaimed to each target group in new and varying ways. At the same time, the Gospels also substantiate that the

missionary work of the first generation of Christians had exactly this characteristic.

The Gospels were also indisputably compiled in order to proclaim the gospel. They were also meant to provide, in addition to the oral 'evangelisation', a written proclamation of the gospel. That is, after all, the reason for their name! While gospel (Greek: *evangelion*, good news) is a general indication of the good news of redemption by Jesus Christ, a Gospel tells the story of Jesus in a special sense—and it is only from such multiple reports that one can come refer to the plural term 'Gospels'. It is significant that the authors are referred to as evangelists.

In the cases of Matthew and John, the Gospels stem from apostles, that is to say, from the circle of the twelve disciples who lived with Jesus. Mark was a co-worker with the Apostle Peter, and Luke was a co-worker with Paul. As a basis, the writers of the Gospels used oral or even written material retained from the times when they listened to Jesus teaching, as was the custom for Jewish rabbis and their disciples; they also used the testimony of witnesses (Luke 1:1-4). All this material was collected and arranged by the authors of the Gospels and framed with their own reports and comments.

In order to be able to better understand a written document, it is, in any event, helpful to know the recipient of the document. The Gospels also were intended for a certain circle of recipients, which we will look at more closely. What do biblical studies and introductory New Testament scholarship roughly tell us about this?

No Gospel expresses clearly for whom it was written, even when Luke,

in the forward to his Gospel, names a highly venerated Theophilus (Luke 1:3). Although Theophilus is initially named as a recipient, according to more common practice, it was more likely that he was the financial backer or promoter of the Gospel. In any case, he was surely not the sole or literal recipient.³ For that reason one can look at the contents of the Gospels in order to come to a conclusion regarding the recipients. In the following, all four Gospels will be investigated with regard to their recipients.

1. The Gospel of Matthew

According to the traditional view, Matthew wrote his Gospel to the Jews. Zahn mentions the background of the Gospel as an 'historical apologetic of the Nazarene and his congregation to Judaism'.⁴ In so doing, Matthew's Gospel is a document that is directed toward Jews and Jewish Christians.⁵

There are also some internal considerations that make this conclusion clear. An often and fondly repeated argument is that the readers were obviously familiar with Jewish customs and practices, and these did not have to be explained. The entire Gospel presupposes the Old Testament as a known

³ Gerhard Hörster, *Einleitung und Bibelkunde zum Neuen Testament (Introduction and New Testament Biblical Studies)* (Wuppertal: Brockhaus, 1993), 52.

⁴ Theodor Zahn, *Einleitung in das Neue Testament (Introduction to the New Testament)* vol. 2. 3. ed. (Leipzig: Deichert'sche, 1907), 268, 294, 303.

⁵ Wilhelm Michaelis, *Einleitung in das Neue Testament (Introduction to the New Testament)*, (Bern: BEG, 1946).

entity and is based upon it.⁶ Even the concept of the Kingdom of God, which plays an important role in other Gospels, is translated into a Jewish formulation that avoids using the name of God and is therefore expressed as the 'Kingdom of Heaven'.

Even the famous Fragments of Papias⁷ should not be too lightly placed in the category of the improbable. Papias mentions that the Gospel of Matthew was present in the Hebrew language and Aramaic language, respectively.⁸ The Jewish background becomes even more clearly evident, since in the Greek-speaking world, this Gospel was initially rarely read.

2. The Gospel of Mark

According to tradition, Mark wrote down the sermons of Peter. Mark was with Peter in Rome, and Mark had his notes with him when he wrote the Gospel, after being urged to write by the congregation in Rome.⁹ Mark concentrated on what was conveyed to him by Peter.

Mark's Gospel is conspicuous evi-

dence of a document, the recipients of which did not have a Jewish background. Customs and practices are explained by Mark (Mark 7:3), Latinisms¹⁰ are present (e.g., Mark 5:9), and from this one can see that Mark was writing to a Roman audience. While one should deal with this thesis with some reservation, it does admittedly fit well into the picture.¹¹

3. The Gospel of Luke

Luke, as already mentioned, includes a dedication in his Gospel. Since this was common in Hellenistic culture, here is evidence for the fact that he wrote for a Hellenistic culture.¹² Luke's emphasis lies clearly on the global claims of the gospel (e.g., the angel's announcement at the birth of Jesus; Luke 2:10, 14). Thus one can say that Luke's Gospel was written to Greeks and Gentiles, respectively.¹³ Especially when one reads the Gospel with the Book of Acts, this thought is visible: What is at stake is that the gospel is preached in all the world (Luke 24:47). For this reason, one can agree with Craig Blomberg when he writes: '...he perhaps knowingly tried to reach a broad audience.'¹⁴

Luke's Gospel is distinguished by an elevated Greek style. Apart from the

6 Hörster, *Einleitung und Bibelkunde*, 42; comp. See more below.

7 Quoted by Eusebius, *Church History* III,39,16; comp. Werner Georg Kümmel, *Einleitung in das Neue Testament (Introduction to the New Testament)*. 21. edition (Heidelberg: Quelle + Meyer, 1983), 91ff.

8 See the following discussion by Erich Mauerhofer. *Einleitung in die Schriften des Neuen Testaments (Introduction to the Writings of the New Testament)* vol. 1. 2. Edition, (Stuttgart: Hänssler Publishing House, 1997), 53-58.

9 Craig L. Blomberg. *Jesus und die Evangelien (Jesus and the Gospels)*, (Nuremberg: VTR, 2000.), 118f.

10 Werner Georg Kümmel *Einleitung in das Neue Testament*, 69 for examples.

11 cf. also Gerhard Hörster, *Einleitung und Bibelkunde*, 33.

12 cf. Armin Daniel Baum. *Lukas als Historiker der letzten Jesusreise (Luke as Historian of Jesus' Last Journey)*, (Wuppertal: R. Brockhaus, 1993).

13 cf. Mauerhofer, *Einleitung*, 157, 161.

14 Blomberg, *Jesus und die Evangelien*, 149.

term ‘amen,’ there are no Hebrew words to be found in it.¹⁵ The language and the style indicate that the Gospel is knowingly directed toward Greek-speaking readers. Luke himself might very well have come out of a Greek-Hellenistic Gentile background, as is seen in Colossians 4:10-14. Luke is mentioned there, among others (4, 14); however prior thereto Paul expressly names those of Jewish background who are accompanying him (verse 11).

4. The Gospel of John

The Gospel of John occupies a special position. It complements the first three Gospels, and John describes the intention of his Gospel in John 20:30-31. He intends to give readers certainty that Jesus is the Christ. From these words it appears that the Gospel of John was certainly intended for the church.¹⁶ John wanted to give the church a footing and certainty for their faith.¹⁷ For this reason, one sees in the letters again and again the testimony that seeks to express the fact that ‘I was there!’.

The Four Gospels as Evidence that the Proclamation of the Gospel was Accommodated to the Target Group

For the recipients of the Gospel the following picture can be conceived:

Gospel	Probable Target Group
Matthew	Jews
Mark	Romans
Luke	Greeks (Gentiles)
John	The Church

With this, there is evidence marshaled from within the New Testament itself that the message of Jesus Christ is not meant to be read unchanged in one holy original language, but rather that translation, selection, and explanation are necessary to ensure that a particular target group can understand the gospel message according to their own cultural and language.

This would be a good point for a transition to an investigation of the missionary thought found within the four Gospels. It has been demonstrated exegetically numerous times that in all four Gospels, in various ways, the central theme is missions as proclamation of the gospel. Here we see that missions also has to do with proclamation among the Gentiles and is part of the goal to reach the entire world.¹⁸ The Gospels propagate what they themselves already do.

¹⁵ Hörster, *Bibelkunde und Einleitung*, 45.

¹⁶ Klaus-Michael Bull, *Bibelkunde des Neuen Testaments (Biblical Study of the New Testament)*. Neukirchen—Vluyn: Neukirchner, 1997), 41.

¹⁷ Also Mauerhofer, *Einleitung*, 245.

¹⁸ E.g., Johannes Nissen, *New Testament and Mission* (Frankfurt et al: Peter Lang, 1999). Matt: 21-48, Mark: 37-48; Luke: 49-60; John: 77-95; Andreas J. Köstenberger, Peter T. O'Brien, *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth: A Biblical Theology of Mission*. New Studies in Biblical Theology 11. Downers Grove (IL), 2001. Matthew: 87-110, Mark: 73-86, Luke: 111-126; John: 203-226; Thomas Schirmmacher, *World Missions—The Heart of the Christ-*

ian Faith, edition afem—mission scripts 18 (Bonn: VKW, 2001).