

## **Cross-Cultural Stumbling Blocks on the Mission Field – Yesterday and Today**

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### **19<sup>th</sup> Century Missionaries and the Attitude of Superiority**

In their book *Mission in an African Way* Oduro, Pretorius, Nussbaum and Born critically reflect on the role of European and North American Protestant missionaries who came to Africa in the 19<sup>th</sup> century:

When the missionaries came to Africa they did not simply bring the Gospel message, they also brought Western culture. The issue was not pure Christianity against impure indigenous belief, but Christianity plus Western culture on the one hand, and indigenous African beliefs and culture on the other hand....The important difference between genuine elements of

Christianity and Western culture was generally not understood and valued.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> T. Oduro, H. Pretorius, S. Nussbaum & B. Born, *Mission in an African Way: A Practical Introduction to African Instituted Churches and their Sense of Mission* (Wellington: Christian Literature Fund / Bible Media, 2008), 37.

As the reason for such an attitude the authors identify a strong sense of cultural and spiritual superiority among the Western missionaries.<sup>2</sup> They believed that their own culture with its customs and values was not just more advanced than African cultures but matchless in every way. Missionaries, Oduro and his co-authors argue, were convinced that for new Christians their traditional African cultures were not only ‘undesirable’ but also ‘dangerous’. In addition, these Western missionaries were also heavily shaped in their thinking and practise by the Enlightenment which had freed them from the superstitious beliefs and customs of the Middle Ages.<sup>3</sup> Lesotha points out that the missionaries, like many of their contemporaries, had accepted the myth of the ‘Dark Continent’.<sup>4</sup> They believed that in contrast to Europe or North America ‘Africa was an embodiment of savagery, intractable ignorance, callous barbarity, and an epicentre of evil’<sup>5</sup>.

According to the authors of *Mission in an African Way*, such an attitude of cultural and spiritual superiority had far reaching implications. It resulted in a number of serious mistakes which the Protestant missionaries made.<sup>6</sup> Thus, missionaries treated their African church members in a paternalistic way and did not take their African worldview seriously. They rejected traditional customs and beliefs, such as beliefs in ancestors and witchcraft, as superstition and refused to discuss them with their African converts.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, they ignored the importance of dreams and visions in African cultures by discarding them as imagination or fantasy. Western missionaries also introduced book-based education which gave African Christians ‘a sense of self-worth and independence’ but left no room for the rich African oral tradition wherein knowledge and wisdom was passed on from the older to the younger generation.<sup>8</sup>

In a paper entitled *Missionaries Go Home: The Integrity of Mission in Africa*, Adamo and Enuwosa mention further examples of a superiority

<sup>2</sup> Oduro, Pretorius, Nussbaum & Born, *Mission in an African Way: A Practical Introduction to African Instituted Churches and their Sense of Mission*, 37 & 39.

<sup>3</sup> Oduro, Pretorius, Nussbaum & Born, *Mission in an African Way: A Practical Introduction to African Instituted Churches and their Sense of Mission*, 39.

<sup>4</sup> P. Lesotha, ‘Postcolonial Reading of Nineteenth-century Missionaries’ Musical Texts: The Case of Lifela Tsa Sione and Lifela Tsa Bakriste’, *Black Theology* 12/2 (2014):139-140.

<sup>5</sup> Lesotha, ‘Postcolonial Reading of Nineteenth-century Missionaries’ Musical Texts: The Case of Lifela Tsa Sione and Lifela Tsa Bakriste’, 140.

<sup>6</sup> Oduro, Pretorius, Nussbaum & Born, *Mission in an African Way: A Practical Introduction to African Instituted Churches and their Sense of Mission*, 40.

<sup>7</sup> Oduro, Pretorius, Nussbaum & Born, *Mission in an African Way: A Practical Introduction to African Instituted Churches and their Sense of Mission*, 44.

<sup>8</sup> Oduro, Pretorius, Nussbaum & Born, *Mission in an African Way: A Practical Introduction to African Instituted Churches and their Sense of Mission*, 45.

attitude. They write the following about the treatment of indigenous clergy by missionaries in Nigeria:

The missionaries were also high-handed in dealing with the Africans. There was racial discrimination in the appointment of bishops. The ordination of ministers [was] done in favour of the British. The conditions of service made by the missionaries for African clergies were poor and offensive to many Africans. A case study here is the treatment, which Western missionaries gave to Bishop Ajayi Crowther in Nigeria. Crowther was the first African bishop. The white missionaries under him were not loyal. They were disobedient and racial. In 1889, white missionaries under Crowther, incited the CMS youth from Cambridge to write a damaging report on the black bishop. They did and the CMS authority stripped Crowther of all power. He died in 1891.<sup>9</sup>

While it is true that there were missionaries who had an attitude of superiority towards indigenous people and made inexcusable mistakes like the ones mentioned above, it would be wrong to suggest that this was true for all missionaries. There are too many examples in African church history of Western missionaries who came to Africa exercising a great deal of humility and displaying sacrificial servanthood. Hiebert distinguishes between the early Protestant missionaries and those who came to Africa in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>10</sup> He argues that the former showed a high degree of love, sacrifice, and cross-cultural sensitivity whereas the latter believed in the superiority of European and North American civilisation. Likewise, Pieter G. Boon states that the early Moravian missionaries in South Africa 'excelled in the essential qualities of humbleness, friendliness and faithfulness'.<sup>11</sup> Elphick stresses that the early Protestant missionaries in Southern Africa, like van Johannes Theodorus van der Kemp, did not display any signs of a superiority attitude.<sup>12</sup> On the contrary, they not only showed a great interest in the cultures of the indigenous people but also challenged the views of their white fellowmen and women:

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<sup>9</sup> D.T. Adamo & J. Enuwosa, 'Missionaries Go Home: The Integrity of Mission in Africa. Paper for the IAMS Assembly Malaysia 2004', [http://www.missionstudies.org/archive/conference/1papers/fp/Adamo\\_&\\_Enuwosa\\_a\\_Full\\_paper.pdf](http://www.missionstudies.org/archive/conference/1papers/fp/Adamo_&_Enuwosa_a_Full_paper.pdf); date of access: 03.08.2016.

<sup>10</sup> P.G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 287.

<sup>11</sup> P.G. Boon, *Hans Peter Hallbeck and the Cradle of Missions in South Africa: A Theological-critical Study*, Unpublished doctoral dissertation (Bloemfontein: University of the Free State, 2015), 400.

<sup>12</sup> R. Elphick, *The Equality of Believers: Protestant Missionaries and the Racial Politics of South Africa* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2012).

To early Protestant missionaries like Van der Kemp, the gospel affirmed that Africans were potential brothers and sisters in Christ. They believed that African languages were the most appropriate instruments of evangelization and that African preachers were the most effective heralds of God's word. These convictions challenged white settlers' confidence that Christianity was a badge of their own superiority and their charter of group privileges.<sup>13</sup>

However, there are also examples of missionaries who served in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and who had the characteristics of their predecessors. Thus, Spencer Tjijenda writes the following about the German-Baltic Lutheran missionary Carl Hugo Hahn who worked in Namibia:

Carl Hugo Hahn...was a true follower of Christ, a peacemaker, church planter and the spiritual father of the Herero nation. He loved our people very dearly and he earnestly wanted to see true spiritual transformation that can only come from hearing, believing, and calling upon the name of Jesus Christ and accepting his gospel... This is what motivated Hahn to be concerned about the spiritual condition of the Herero-Mbanderu people.<sup>14</sup>

If Hahn was the spiritual father of the Hereros, Martin Rautanen deserves the title of spiritual father of the Ovambos, another Namibian people group. Rautanen came to Namibia in 1869 and worked in the country for over fifty years. Rieck comments on his life and ministry:

His life was incarnational. He lived very humbly among the people he preached to. He respected the authorities of the kings, even when he radically disagreed with them. By and by he won the battle of faith and before long the gospel had taken hold of many people. Today the work in Ovamboland rests on this gospel foundation.<sup>15</sup>

The overall picture which Oduro and his co-authors paint of 19<sup>th</sup> century Protestant missionaries is surely too negative. With their harsh criticism of the missionaries' critical attitude towards certain cultural and religious practices, such as witchcraft and ancestor worship, they are in danger of promoting another extreme and unhelpful mission approach, namely over-contextualisation or syncretism, i.e. 'the replacement or dilution of essential

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<sup>13</sup> Elphick, *The Equality of Believers: Protestant Missionaries and the Racial Politics of South Africa*.

<sup>14</sup> T.S. Tjijenda, 'Hugo Hahn and the Spiritual Condition of the Herero-Mbanderu People', in *Mission Namibia: Challenges and Opportunities for the Church in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*, ed. T. Prill (München: Grin, 2012), 144-145.

<sup>15</sup> J. Rieck, 'Dr Martin Rautanen ('Nakambale') – Apostle of the Ovambos', <http://jriek.blogspot.com/2009/10/missionary-pioneers-in-namibia-3-martin.html> date of access: 06.08.2016.

elements of the gospel'<sup>16</sup>. In the same way, it is too simplistic to identify, as they do, the attitude of cultural, spiritual and racial superiority as the core root of all problems. A lack of cross-cultural knowledge and sensitivity certainly contributed to the mistakes missionaries made.

Unlike Carl Hugo Hahn and Martin Rautanen, who both grew up in the multicultural and multilingual context of the Russian Empire,<sup>17</sup> not every missionary who came to Africa from Europe or North America in the 19<sup>th</sup> century had cross-cultural experience let alone cross-cultural training as it is available today. Some were ordinary farmers or craftsmen<sup>18</sup> who had not been exposed to other cultures before entering the African mission field. Others had undergone an intensive preparation which 'consisted of Latin, Greek, classical literature, philosophy, as well as theological training'<sup>19</sup> but were not necessarily prepared to live among people of other cultures. As Schwartz points out, missionaries at that time were often not trained at all to minister cross-culturally.<sup>20</sup> They received spiritual and professional but no cross-cultural training. As a result, these missionaries were prone to fall into cross-cultural pitfalls and to erect barriers which would hinder the spread of the gospel and the growth of the Church.

### 21<sup>st</sup> Century Missionaries

One would assume that more than two hundred years after the first Protestant missionaries came to Africa both the attitude of superiority and the lack of cross-cultural sensitivity belonged to the past. Western and non-Western mission organisations and churches emphasize that they are in partnership with African churches and para-church organisations; and in contrast to their 19<sup>th</sup> century predecessors, many missionaries today receive some form of cross-cultural training before they leave for Africa. However, experience shows that both do not prevent today's missionaries from falling into the same old pitfalls.

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<sup>16</sup> A.S Moreau, 'Syncretism', *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. W.A Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2001), 1158.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. S. Heininen, 'Martin Rautanen in Namibia and the Mission Board in Helsinki', in *Changing Relations Between Churches in Europe and Africa: The Internationalization of Christianity and Politics in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*, eds. K. Kunter & J.H. Schjørring (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2008), 56.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. B. Sundkler & C. Steed, *A History of the Church in Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 110.

<sup>19</sup> Lesotha, 'Postcolonial Reading of Nineteenth-century Missionaries' Musical Texts: The Case of Lifela Tsa Sione and Lifela Tsa Bakriste', 140.

<sup>20</sup> G.J. Schwartz, 'Missionary Education: Training for Cross-cultural Christian Ministry' 1973, 1 <http://wmausa.org/wp-content/uploads/Missionary-Education-By-Glenn-Schwartz.pdf>; date of access 06.08.2016.

Unfortunately, an attitude of superiority and a lack of cross-cultural sensitivity can still be found among 21<sup>st</sup> century Western and non-Western missionaries who serve on the African continent.

### **Communication, Language and Superiority**

A Christian para-church organisation in Southern Africa was led by both foreign missionaries and local Christians. At the leadership meetings, the local African Christians usually kept very quiet while most of the talking was done by the missionaries. The latter interpreted the silence of the former as ignorance or a lack of interest in the affairs of the organisation. The truth, however, was far from that. The local Christians were very much committed to the organisation but, amongst other reasons for their silence, they felt inferior to the missionaries and the missionaries through their behaviour fostered that feeling.

Though English was the official language of the country, hardly any local person spoke it as his or her native language. For the local members of the leadership team English was a second or third language, while the missionaries from the UK and USA were all English native speakers. Often they would use words or expressions their indigenous colleagues had never heard before. When it came to minute writing, a missionary would have completed the task within a very short time, while for a local member of the team it would take much more effort. All advertising material or press releases were written or proof-read by missionaries. In addition, the missionaries showed no interest in learning any of the local languages. They simply did not see the necessity as they were serving in a country which had English as the sole official language and in which people spoke that language to various degrees.

Though it was not their intention, by using the English language the way they did the missionaries not only exercised power over their indigenous co-leaders but also sent out a message of communicative superiority. This message was emphasised even more by the missionaries' refusal to learn a local language.

Sometimes it happens that missionaries who do not have English as their first language find themselves at the receiving end of such a superiority attitude too. English has become the language of global Christianity. This can be seen in a variety of developments. All over the world the teaching of English, for example, is used by missionaries as an evangelistic tool.<sup>21</sup> Most cross-cultural missionary training colleges run their programmes fully or partly in English, and in many international mission organisations English serves as the *lingua franca*. When it comes, for example, to the appointment of leaders within such

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<sup>21</sup> A. Pennycook & S. Makoni, 'The Modern Mission: The Language Effects of Christianity', *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education* 4/1 (2005):141.

organisations, English native speakers often have an advantage over their non-native, English-speaking colleagues. They are preferred not because they are better qualified for the position, but because of their language skills: they tend to have the ability to better articulate themselves in the team language than their Brazilian, Korean or Philippine colleagues.

It can have negative effects when missionaries underestimate the power of language. This is especially true for those missionaries who come from English-speaking countries and who serve in a context where English is used on a daily basis though not as a first language. To have a native's command of English in such a situation means to have power. This is certainly true for those parts of Africa which were under British rule or influence in the past and which still use English as the language of politics, business and education. In order to avoid the mistakes described above and to overcome an attitude of superiority which is rooted in language skills, it is important for missionaries to understand how problematic it can be to speak a privileged language in a multilingual context. Weiß and Schwietring write:

In multilingual contexts, problematic constellations regularly arise from the fact that one language is elevated to the status of the official language and so [thereby becoming] the language of the elites and the powerful, while other languages are relegated to a lower status and discriminated against. This may be observed in various political and historical contexts, and invariably where a plurality of indigenous and partly unwritten languages are subordinated to an official language in state affairs and transactions. This is particularly clear in post-colonial Africa, where the problems of de-colonialisation amidst the continuance of colonial power structures may be read off from the linguistic relations.<sup>22</sup>

For English-speaking missionaries who serve in such a situation, it is crucial that they are aware of (a) the challenges local Christians and fellow missionaries face by using a language which is not their first language and (b) the role a person's first language plays in general:

The first language acquired by an individual necessarily becomes his "natural language". Everything that he later thinks and decides can be analysed and interpreted by his understanding, but finally he must always reach back to the level of his natural language. This observation touches on the double function of the first language. The first language lays the foundation for the understanding, its possibilities of grasping

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<sup>22</sup> J. Weiß & T. Schwietring, 'The Power of Language: A Philosophical-sociological Reflection' (Goethe-Institut, 2016)

<http://www.goethe.de/lhr/prj/mac/msp/en1253450.htm>; date of access: 02.08.2016.

things and expressing them. And at the same time it socialises the individual.<sup>23</sup>

One way of gaining an awareness of the challenges that local Christians and fellow missionaries face is for English-speaking missionaries to learn the local language or at least one of the local languages. By learning a local language it will be easier for them to identify with local Christians and missionary colleagues. It will help English-speaking missionaries to understand the difficulties and limitations which occur by being compelled to operate in a second or even third language. In addition, English-speaking missionaries will also gain new insights into a local culture which will enrich them personally and better equip them for their ministries. Missionaries, however, who insist on speaking English only face the danger of staying what they were when they first entered their country of service: cultural outsiders. Without learning a local language they might still gain some cultural knowledge but in most cases it will be a rather superficial knowledge.

In his book titled *Cross-cultural Servanthood: Serving the World in Christlike Humility*, Duane Elmer underlines the importance of language learning.<sup>24</sup> According to Elmer, to learn another person's language means to value that person.<sup>25</sup> Not to learn a person's language means to reject that person. For missionaries, language learning is therefore a must. Elmer writes: 'We cannot separate ourselves from the language we speak. It is how we define ourselves and make meaning out of life. Not to know my language is not to know me. Even when short-term missionaries make an effort to learn at least some greetings and a farewell, it communicates that they value others.'<sup>26</sup>

The importance of communicating the gospel in the *heart language* of people is emphasized by the evangelist Luke. In Acts, chapter 2, Luke tells us how Jesus' disciples being filled with the Holy Spirit began to speak in other languages on the day of the first Pentecost. Luke also informs us about the reaction of those who were witnessing this manifestation of God's Spirit:

When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being spoken. Utterly amazed, they asked: 'Aren't all these who are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language? Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya

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<sup>23</sup> Weiß & Schwietring, 'The Power of Language: A Philosophical-sociological Reflection'.

<sup>24</sup> D. Elmer, *Cross-cultural Servanthood: Serving the World in Christlike Humility* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2006).

<sup>25</sup> Elmer, *Cross-cultural Servanthood: Serving the World in Christlike Humility*, 66-67.

<sup>26</sup> Elmer, *Cross-cultural Servanthood: Serving the World in Christlike Humility*, 67.



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!’<sup>27</sup>

John Stott points out that the glossolalia phenomenon of Acts 2 should be interpreted as ‘a deliberate and dramatic reversal of the curse of Babel’<sup>28</sup>. At Babel people were separated by language because of their rebellion against God.<sup>29</sup> Because of their desire to be like God, God caused them to speak in many different languages and dispersed them throughout the earth. However, on the day of Pentecost ‘the language barrier was supernaturally overcome as a sign that the nations would now be gathered together in Christ’<sup>30</sup>. The glossolalia phenomenon, however, also demonstrates, as Franklin and Niemandt state, God’s acceptance of all languages and the importance He places on them as a means of communicating his truths.<sup>31</sup> Timothy Tennent writes that in Jerusalem the followers of Jesus were ‘baptized into the reality of the infinite translatability of the gospel for every language and culture’<sup>32</sup>.

### **National Culture and Superiority**

A missionary in an African country insisted that all his co-workers would address him by his first name. Unlike his Western fellow missionaries, his indigenous co-workers were not comfortable with his request. They would have preferred to address him by his clergy title and surname as it was custom in their culture, but out of respect for the missionary they felt obliged to do as he wished. The missionary was aware of the local customs but thought that among fellow Christian believers there was no need to follow this particular cultural norm. On one occasion the missionary was invited to preach in the church of one of his female local co-workers. The sermon was well received and the church leadership expressed their gratitude to the missionary. However, after he had left the church the leaders approached his female colleague. They had noticed that she seemed to be very close to the missionary - she was even on first name terms with him. The leaders were now wondering if she was also in an inappropriate relationship with this married man. The woman felt ashamed and tried her best to explain the situation.

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<sup>27</sup> Acts 2:6-11.

<sup>28</sup> J. Stott, *The Message of Acts* (Leicester: IVP, 2000), 68.

<sup>29</sup> Genesis 11:1-9.

<sup>30</sup> Stott, *The Message of Acts*, 68.

<sup>31</sup> K.J. Franklin & C.J.P. Niemandt, ‘Vision 2025 and the Bible Translation Movement’, *HTS Theological Studies* 2013, 69(1):3.

<sup>32</sup> T.C. Tennent, *Invitation to World Missions: A Trinitarian Missiology for the Twenty-first Century* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2010), 412.

The Western missionary came from a low-context culture, i.e. an informal culture. Many informal cultures are characterised by a small power distance. ‘Power distance refers to the lack of familiar relationship between the levels of authority, such as teacher and student, officer and soldier, boss and employee, even parent and child.’<sup>33</sup> In cultures with a low power distance it is normal to address people by their given names. A dislike for titles and other status symbols, as well as any form of protocol is very common too.<sup>34</sup> Gender difference does not play any or hardly any role; men and women are more or less treated equally.<sup>35</sup>

The culture in the missionary’s host country, however, was a formal or high context culture. In formal cultures there are a multitude of rules and norms which dominate people’s everyday lives.<sup>36</sup> In formal cultures it matters how people dress, how they eat or how they greet each other. Thus, in the missionary’s host country it was expected that people in authority, including church leaders and missionaries, were treated with respect. It was the cultural norm to address them with their titles and surnames. By insisting on being called by his first name, the missionary not only disrespected this cultural norm but also sent out a message of cultural superiority: the local Christians needed to be liberated from this cultural rule and they could achieve this liberation by following the missionary’s example. While it is true that every Christian needs to abstain from cultural practices which are sinful, i.e. which go against God’s standards as we find them in Scripture, the practice of addressing fellow believers in a formal way does certainly not fall into this category.

When dealing with cultural practices there is the danger for Western missionaries to become victims of their categorical thinking. ‘Many who live in Western cultures’, writes Elmer, ‘see life rather black and white.’<sup>37</sup> He continues:

They often think in a two-dimensional perspective such as we and they, good and bad, moral and immoral, right and wrong, me and you, church and state, or secular and sacred. Even the proverb “Do you see the glass half full or half empty?” represents a two-dimensional or dichotomistic way of seeing life.<sup>38</sup>

Missionaries whose thinking is shaped in such a way are in danger of making judgements which hinder their ministries and the work of the gospel.

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<sup>33</sup> S.A. Lanier, *Foreign to Familiar* (Hagerstown: McDougal Publishing, 2007), 92.

<sup>34</sup> Lanier, *Foreign to Familiar*, 102.

<sup>35</sup> Lanier, *Foreign to Familiar*, 96.

<sup>36</sup> Lanier, *Foreign to Familiar*, 80.

<sup>37</sup> D. Elmer, *Cross-cultural Connections: Stepping Out and Fitting in Around the World*, (Downers Grove: IVP, 2002), 142.

<sup>38</sup> Elmer, *Cross-cultural Connections: Stepping Out and Fitting in Around the World*, 142.

There is the danger that they condemn a particular cultural norm or practice of their host country as wrong and promote their own cultural way of doing things as the only right way, when in reality none of the two are right or wrong but just different. The conviction that their own cultural practices are right might give them a sense of security,<sup>39</sup> but local people may perceive them as being arrogant and as a result refuse to listen to and cooperate with them.

However, Western missionaries are not the only ones who can fall into the cultural superiority trap. Non-Western missionaries from Asia or Latin America are not immune from confusing the gospel of Christ with their own cultures. Whiteman writes the following about Korean missionaries:

As part of their missionary training and orientation, they seldom if ever are introduced to the insights of anthropology that would help them discover the nature of their cross-cultural interaction and ministry. And because Korea is one of the most homogenous societies in the world, Korean missionaries easily confuse Christianity with their Korean cultural patterns of worship, so their converts are led to believe that to become a Christian, one must also adopt Korean culture. If we Americans are guilty of wrapping the gospel in the American flag, then Koreans metaphorically wrap the gospel in kimchi (a potent symbol of their culture).<sup>40</sup>

When it comes to dealing with cultural differences on the mission field, the apostle Paul sets a good example for today's mission workers. In his first letter to the Corinthians, chapter 9 he mentions some of his missionary principles. One of these principles spelt out here by Paul is the principle of cultural sensitivity or adaptation. We can find it in verses 19 to 23:

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

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<sup>39</sup> Cf. S.G. Lingenfelter & M.K. Mayers, *Ministering Cross-culturally: An Incarnational Model for Personal Relationships* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2008), 54.

<sup>40</sup> D.L. Whiteman, 'Anthropology and Mission: The Incarnational Connection', in *Mission & Culture: The Louis J. Luzbetak Lectures*, ed. S.B. Bevans (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2012), 82.

I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel that I may share in its blessings.<sup>41</sup>

In this passage Paul refers to various people groups who he tried to win for Christ: ethnic Jews, Gentiles, and Gentile Godfearers, as well as the weak. Paul stresses that he ‘became like’ them in order to win them over for the Christian faith. What does he mean by that? Rudolph argues that these words of Paul need to be interpreted in the context of table fellowship: ‘When Paul wrote that he “became as” others, in all likelihood he did not mean that he imitated them like a chameleon, but he closely associated with them through table-fellowship, and conformed to their customs (within the limits of God’s law) in keeping with the Jewish ethic of hospitality.’<sup>42</sup> Other scholars interpret Paul’s words more broadly. To them Paul is simply stating here his willingness to meet people on their own ground as long as no moral principle is at stake.<sup>43</sup> Johnson puts it this way: ‘Paul adopts the cultural customs of those to whom he preaches so that nothing will hinder people’s embracing the gospel of Christ.’<sup>44</sup>

When we look at Paul’s ministry, we see that he demonstrated this attitude a number of times (e.g. Acts 16:3; 18:18; 21:23-24). In Acts 16:3, for example, we read that Paul, who had vehemently rejected the false teaching that circumcision is necessary for salvation (Gal. 2:3-5), did exactly that: he circumcised his new co-worker Timothy. Paul circumcised Timothy not because of a change of conviction, but because he knew that it would be helpful for his evangelistic mission among the Jews in the Lystra area. He circumcised Timothy out of consideration for them and their customs and scruples. As the son of a mixed marriage Timothy was considered to be Jewish, but for some reason he had not been circumcised.<sup>45</sup> Paul was aware that the Jews might not accept Timothy’s ministry if he remained uncircumcised.<sup>46</sup> He knew that with an uncircumcised co-worker he might ‘not have access to synagogues, his strategic point of contact in most cities’<sup>47</sup>. In other words, by circumcising his young co-worker Paul removed a potential stumbling block for the salvation of the Jews in Lystra and beyond. He practiced cultural sensitivity, so that their

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<sup>41</sup> *The Holy Bible, New international Version*, 2007.

<sup>42</sup> D.J. Rudolph, *A Jew to the Jews: Jewish Contours of Pauline Flexibility in 1 Corinthians 9:19-23* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 191.

<sup>43</sup> E.g. J. Hargreaves, *A Guide to 1 Corinthians* (London: SPCK, 1996), 122; S.J. Kistemaker, *1 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1993), 305; R.C. Lenski, *I and II Corinthians* (Columbus: Wartburg Press, 1955), 376; L. Morris, *1 Corinthians* (Leicester: IVP, 1993), 136; J. Phillips, *Exploring 1 Corinthians: An Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2002), 197.

<sup>44</sup> A. F. Johnson, *1 Corinthians* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2004), 147.

<sup>45</sup> I.H. Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Leicester: IVP, 1999), 259.

<sup>46</sup> J. Stott, *The Message of Acts* (Leicester: IVP, 1991), 254.

<sup>47</sup> W.J. Larkin, *Acts* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1995), 232.

culture would not hinder people from accepting the gospel. The apostle Paul was indeed ‘prepared to go to extreme lengths to meet people’<sup>48</sup>. Blomberg comments:

[I]n morally grey areas of life, such as eating food sacrificed to idols, and their numerous cultural equivalents in any era, Paul bends over backwards to be sensitive to the *non-Christian* mores of society around him so as not to hinder people from accepting the gospel. He does not assume that all aspects of culture are inherently evil but practices what has come to be called the contextualization of the gospel – changing the *forms* of the message precisely in order to *preserve* its content. Then Christianity stands the best chance of being understood and even accepted.<sup>49</sup>

For today’s missionaries to exercise cultural sensitivity like the apostle Paul did means not to impose their own norms and practices on unbelievers and fellow believers in their host country – even if the missionaries are convinced that their motives to do so are good. A missionary who asks local people to use his first name might do so with good intentions, i.e. to break down barriers and establish personal relationships; but in a country where even married people do not call themselves by their first names, such a request is very likely seen as sign of ignorance or disrespect.

### **Church Culture and Superiority**

A Western missionary who taught homiletics in a small African Bible college noticed that the sermons preached in the local churches he had visited were almost exclusively non-expository topical sermons. Coming from a church tradition which highly valued not only expository preaching but also sermon series which focussed on biblical books, he decided that a change in the churches’ practise was needed. To bring about such a change was a long term project and it had to start with the training of future pastors. At the next curriculum review it was decided that the focus of the preaching classes should be expository preaching. Furthermore, students were no longer asked to preach in the weekly college devotions. The preaching was done exclusively by college staff and trusted guest preachers. For each semester a particular book of the Bible was chosen and each preacher was given one chapter to preach from. While the students appreciated the new preaching style, they felt uncomfortable that topical sermons were no longer preached at the college and hardly dealt with in class. They had the impression that their traditional way

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<sup>48</sup> Morris, *1 Corinthians*, 136.

<sup>49</sup> C. Blomberg, *1 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 186.

of preaching was considered inferior by their lecturers. As a result, most of the students reversed to the preaching of topical sermons when they entered the ministry after graduation.

The Western missionary rightly believed in the central role which preaching should play in the life and mission of the Church. The biblical authors leave us with no doubt that preaching was central to Jesus' earthly ministry and to the ministry of the apostles. When Jesus started his ministry he said to his disciples: 'Let us go somewhere else - to the nearby villages - so that I can preach there also. That is why I have come'<sup>50</sup>. From Pentecost on the apostles continued with the preaching of the good news. In his first letter to the Corinthians, the apostle writes about his motivation: 'Yet when I preach the gospel, I cannot boast, for I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!' (1 Cor. 9:16). In Acts 6:4 the apostles underline the primacy of preaching when they declare that they will continue to give their 'attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.' The missionary also recognised the great value of an expository sermon, which Chapell defines as 'a message whose structure and thought are derived from a biblical text, that covers the scope of the text, and that explains the features and context of the text in order to disclose the enduring principles for faithful thinking, living, and worship intended by the Spirit, who inspired the text'<sup>51</sup>. However, by insisting on one particular preaching style he sent out a message of theological superiority, a message which did not convince his students.

The missionary came from a church with a strong low-context orientation. In low-context churches the sermons are usually, as Plueddemann points out, expository sermons which 'concentrate on what the Bible says and less on the immediate felt needs of the people'<sup>52</sup>. The sermons are logically structured and usually delivered in a calm and dignified manner. The worship service in low-context churches usually follows a certain order and starts and finishes precisely at the set times. The songs and hymns, which are sung, tend to contain good biblical theology and often focus on the attributes of God and the work of Christ.

Most of the churches the missionary had visited and to which his students belonged were high-context churches. High context-churches prefer topical sermons which draw on the Scriptures but seek to address the present needs of the congregational members.<sup>53</sup> The sermons are often delivered in a lively

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<sup>50</sup> Mark 1:38.

<sup>51</sup> B. Chapell, *Christ-centred Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 31.

<sup>52</sup> J.E. Plueddemann, *Leading Across Cultures: Effective Ministry and Mission in the Global Church* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2009), 87.

<sup>53</sup> Plueddemann, *Leading Across Cultures: Effective Ministry and Mission in the Global Church*, 87.

way.<sup>54</sup> The same is true for the worship in such churches. There tends to be a lot of body movements among the worshippers and the songs which the congregation sing are often vigorous songs with simple repetitive messages.<sup>55</sup>

In most churches we can find elements of both a high-context and a low-context orientation.<sup>56</sup> There is, however, a danger when one orientation becomes too dominant:

The danger of a service that is overly high-context is that it can lead to shallow emotionalism, self-centeredness and false teaching, while the danger of overly idea-oriented worship is that it can lead to dead orthodoxy. Paul reminded the church in Corinth to pray and sing with the spirit and with understanding (1 Cor 14:15). Apparently, the temptation of the early church was to dichotomize between a high-context emotionalism and a low-context worship without passion.<sup>57</sup>

Paul's principle of becoming all things to all people also applies to matters of church culture. While it is very helpful to introduce students from a high-context church to the concept of sermon series and expository preaching which focuses on a particular Bible passage, they should also be taught to preach expository topical sermons which are grounded in Scripture and which avoid common mistakes like proof-texting or spiritualising.

Exercising sensitivity in matters of church culture also means to abstain from fighting unnecessary theological battles. If a missionary is called to serve in an African community which cherishes the King James Bible, it is not necessarily helpful if he categorically refuses to use this Bible version and preaches all his sermons exclusively from his ESV or NIV Bible (though he might consider these better translations). In a situation like that the missionary might have to become a King James Bible preacher and teacher if he wants people to listen to and learn from him. This does not mean that over time he cannot introduce people to another Bible translation, but it does not help the cause of the gospel to take a rebel stance on non-gospel matters.

## Preparing for Cross-cultural Ministry in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

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<sup>54</sup> Cf. A. Wright, 'Lessons learned from my minority experience', in *What Happens When Students are in the Minority: Experiences That Impact Human Performance*, in ed. C.B. Hutchison (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009), 182.

<sup>55</sup> Plueddemann, *Leading Across Cultures: Effective Ministry and Mission in the Global Church*, 87.

<sup>56</sup> Plueddemann, *Leading Across Cultures: Effective Ministry and Mission in the Global Church*, 86.

<sup>57</sup> Plueddemann, *Leading Across Cultures: Effective Ministry and Mission in the Global Church*, 86.

Over thirty years ago, J. Herbert Kane, in his well-known book titled *A Concise History of the Christian World Mission*, made a passionate appeal in favour of thorough theological and cross-cultural training for future missionaries. Kane wrote:

Qualifications for missionary service have risen considerably in the last twenty or thirty years, but we still have a long way to go. Many mission boards still accept candidates having only the minimum requirement of one year of biblical studies. Others require a seminary education, but say nothing about professional training in cross-cultural communications; missionary anthropology; history, philosophy, theology of missions; and the non-Christian religions – to say nothing of crucial issues or area studies... The time has come to call a halt to this unsatisfactory procedure... We should do our very best to send out fully qualified missionaries. Anything less is unfair to the national churches and dishonoring to the Lord.<sup>58</sup>

In *Preparing to Serve: Training for Cross-Cultural Mission*, published in 1995, David Harley points out that missionaries without proper training cannot only cause receiving churches to suffer but can also inflict serious pain on themselves. Harley states:

If missionaries are sent out without adequate preparation the consequences can be disastrous on themselves, their families and their ministry. The high rate of attrition among missionaries is proof of that. Many go out without being warned beforehand of the difficulties they may face. They are unable to speak the language. They have little understanding of the culture and the way things should be done. They experience the pressure of isolation and hostility. They see little response to their ministry. They find it difficult to get used to the climate. They succumb to local ailments. Sickness, fatigue and discouragement take their toll, and eventually they return home dispirited and disillusioned. In the worst cases they remain spiritual cripples for the rest of their lives, condemned by their own sense of failure.<sup>59</sup>

Harley's and Kane's observations are still valid today. Whiteman states that 'the need for training missionaries from the West as well as training non-Western missionaries in cross-cultural understanding has never been greater,

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<sup>58</sup> J.H. Kane, *A Concise History of the Christian World Mission* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book, 1982), 7-8.

<sup>59</sup> C.D. Harley, *Preparing to Serve: Training for Cross-cultural Mission* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1995), 7.



especially in this age of ‘the coming of global Christianity’<sup>60</sup>. While the value of cross-cultural preparation and theological training for missionaries is widely recognised in mission circles, in practice, many missionaries still go out ill-equipped for their ministries. Most agencies require some kind of formal Bible and cross-cultural training from their missionaries. However, the standards in this field have been lowered in recent years.<sup>61</sup> Instead of one or two years full-time training at a Bible or missionary training college, it is considered sufficient for candidates to attend a six-week residential course or to complete a basic online course in cross-cultural mission.<sup>62</sup> One reason for this development is that fewer candidates are committed to serving for a longer period or even a life-time in Africa, Asia, Europe or Latin America. To require such workers to attend a missionary training college for two years is seen as unreasonable. There seems to be a fear that such a requirement could deter potential workers from going out.

One can only agree with Harley when he writes that ‘[b]oth Western and non-Western missionaries need to develop a sensitive appreciation to other cultures’<sup>63</sup>. Missionaries who fail to do so demonstrate ‘the same colonial attitude that characterised some missionary endeavour in the past’<sup>64</sup>. When missionaries impose their own leadership styles, evangelistic methods, or church culture on the people they are supposed to serve, they become, as Harley puts it, ‘guilty of ecclesiastical imperialism’<sup>65</sup>. A thorough programme of cross-cultural and theological training can prevent missionaries from falling into such a pitfall. That being said, another helpful way of preparing for cross-cultural ministry overseas is cross-cultural ministry at home. Christians who have been involved in international student or refugee ministries or who have attended an expatriate or ethnic minority church back home are usually better equipped to serve abroad than those who have not, including Christians who have only superficial experience with both Christians and non-Christians from other cultures.

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<sup>60</sup> Whiteman, ‘Anthropology and Mission: The Incarnational Connection’, 83.

<sup>61</sup> T. Prill, ‘Evangelical Mission Organisations, Postmodern Controversies, and the New Heartbeat of Mission’, *Foundations: An International Journal of Evangelical Theology* 61 (2011):32.

<sup>62</sup> Prill, ‘Evangelical Mission Organisations, Postmodern Controversies, and the New Heartbeat of Mission’, 33.

<sup>63</sup> Harley, *Preparing to Serve: Training for Cross-cultural Mission*, 9.

<sup>64</sup> Harley, *Preparing to Serve: Training for Cross-cultural Mission*, 9.

<sup>65</sup> Harley, *Preparing to Serve: Training for Cross-cultural Mission*, 9.