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Gospel and Culture

This is the third issue of Indian Journal of Theology focused on the theme 'Gospel and Culture'. We have devoted the September issues of the journal to deepen and clarify our theological understanding of Gospel-culture relationship. In India and other Asian countries this issue is vital for the self understanding of the Church as well as its mission. In Asian countries Christianity and Gospel have been identified with the Western culture consciously and unconsciously. It is true that in human existence we cannot know reality apart from culture. As Ruth Benedict has pointed out no one 'ever looks at the world with pristine eyes'. For that reason absolutizing any one culture or identifying one culture with Christianity is certainly hindrance to the understanding and appropriation of the Gospel. At the same time Gospel is gospel only in reference to a particular context. Gospel the Kingdom of God is 'like yeast that a woman took and mixed into large amount of flour until worked all through the dough' (Matt. 13:33, NIV). The seed of the Gospel has to grow from within the womb of particular culture Gospel ceases to be Gospel when it means cultural invasion.

One of the key issues in Gospel-culture debate is that of identifying the seed of the Gospel, core or the ultimate centre of the Gospel that can incarnate in all cultures and transcend them. In the Christian tradition, Gospel has come to mean the Good News of the Kingdom of God, what God has done in the life and work of Jesus Christ. According to Chenchiah, Gospel is not a doctrine of salvation but the announcement of a new creative order in Jesus, the creative expression of God's higher purpose with regard to human beings. Jesus is the first fruits of a new creation, the Adipurusha of a new humanity (M.M. Thomas). It is larger than Christianity. According to Thomas, the core of the Gospel is the 'crucified and resurrected Christ'. Cross is the universal principles of self-

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sacrifice which serves as the source of a new human fellowship (koinonia) that transcends all cultural, linguistic, geographical and sex barriers. Indian Christian theologians recognize that all movements which bear the marks of the self sacrificing and community building ministry of Jesus as from the Holy Spirit (S.J. Samartha). Wherever love identifies itself with the struggle of oppressed humanity for liberation into a community of justice and love there cross of Jesus Christ is acknowledged. Wherever faith in God upholds human freedom over nature (not eco-destructive), laws and structures of society, there the Gospel is identified.

The most debated question today probably is the question about the relation between the Gospel of God in Jesus Christ with 'Gospel of God in other religious traditions and incarnations of God in other cultures'. Some of our theological thinkers have already started interpreting the uniqueness of Jesus Christ as distinctiveness admitting the distinctiveness of other religions and their heroes and prophets. What it means on the one hand is a refusal to admit the idea of monopoly of truth confined to one religion, and on the other hand an acknowledgment that truth of the Gospel is enriched by various cultural insights. It is in such interactions cultures are strengthened in a humanistic way and transcended in order to create a world community, which is the mission of the Church.