

For Tropical Preaching:  
Proclaiming Biblical Truth Cross-Culturally

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The Gospel minister of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century is often called upon to preach and teach to different ethnicities both at home and abroad. This can be quite challenging as the following story from my missionary career illustrates.

In the summer of 1991 while living in North Africa, I travelled down to East Africa with my family to visit Don and Mary Alice Dolifka, a couple ministering to the *Samburu* tribe near Maralal in northern Kenya. The nomadic *Samburu* wear traditional red robes, herd cattle and live in mud dwellings. Dolifka asked me to preach a message to a group of twenty men seated on boulders beneath a grove of trees on Sunday morning. I spoke in Swahili while a young *Samburu* college student translated into the local language.

Since these men had never attended a church service nor listened to a message from the Bible, I decided to speak on a simple passage - the woman at the well in John 4:3-42. I began the sermon by asking, "How would you like it if a man came to your village and asked for water from one of your women?"

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Surprisingly, the men rose from their rocks and began discussing my query in a small circle. Since the question was asked rhetorically I was not prepared for the interruption. The missionary and Seth, my ten-year-old son, observing my discomfort, watched with amusement. After five minutes the men resumed their positions. The oldest stood up and spoke for the group, "We would not like it. We do not want anyone speaking to our women, not even Jesus."

Surprised and perplexed, I realized this sermon was going to be more difficult than I had imagined. I decided to go a different direction. As the message progressed I made the mistake of asking another rhetorical question. As I presented the Gospel of Christ and spoke of the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus, I asked, "How many of you have ever heard of someone who died and came back from the dead after three days?"

Once again the men stood from their rocks and began discussing my question. I thought, "What could they be talking about this time?" After about five minutes everyone sat down again on the rocks. The oldest said with great gravity, "One man here knows someone who died and came back from the dead after two days, but none of us has ever heard of anyone who came back after three."

When this event occurred I had been a missionary for eight years. I believed I was fairly knowledgeable about cross-cultural communication. Although I thought I was clearly conveying Biblical truth, cultural barriers blocked a smooth transfer of meaning. This incident underscores the need for special care when speaking to other societies. Even though new technologies and ease of travel allow the modern minister to communicate globally, Hesselgrave claims, "The cultural barriers are the most formidable."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> David J. Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991), p. 96.

## Introduction

Delivering oral presentations to other cultures is a subset of the broader field of communications. A couple of definitions are helpful going forward. Eldridge defines communication as “the transfer of meaning through the use of symbols.”<sup>3</sup> Cross-cultural communication refers to the process of conveying meaning across societal divides. The purpose of this article is to examine this procedure from a Christian perspective. Hesselgrave defines the missionary *problem* as “communicating Christ across cultural barriers to the various people of the world.”<sup>4</sup> Examining the messaging process will assist preachers in limiting their cultural missteps as they reach other societies for Christ.

The topic of this journal issue involves communicating the gospel orally through preaching and teaching. The ancients classified this field as the academic discipline of *rhetoric*. For them the art of public speaking was more highly esteemed than homiletics today. Hesselgrave states, “Rhetoric represented the highest of intellectual achievement because it entailed both consummate learning and persuasive skills.”<sup>5</sup> This combination of scholarship and oral presentation was prized above all else in the classical era.

In order to address the subject, this article uses a combination of models based upon Aristotle’s work. This philosopher subdivided the delivery of oral messages into three categories: (1) the speaker, (2) the speech and (3) the audience. Other writers throughout history have employed similar terms. These include (1) the source, (2) the message and (3) the respondent.<sup>6</sup> In a similar vein, Eugene Nida introduced a helpful model for understanding Christian cross-cultural communication he terms the three-culture model. This construct consists of (1) the missionary culture (source), (2) the Bible culture (message), and (3) the mission field culture (respondent).<sup>7</sup> I will present an analysis of communicating Biblical truth cross-culturally using this scaffolding.

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<sup>3</sup> S. Eldridge, In Hesselgrave, *Ibid.*, p. 55.

<sup>4</sup>Hesselgrave, p. 26.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* p. 33.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* p. 41.

<sup>7</sup> Eugene Nida, in Hesselgrave, p. 107.

These three parts of communication are interrelated, not sequential. The speaker influences the message, which impacts the hearers while the cultures of the three affect them all. Martin and Nakayama comment on this complicated process.

Communication is a symbolic process whereby meaning is shared and negotiated. In addition, communication is dynamic, may be unintentional, and is receiver oriented. The relationship between culture and communication is complex because (1) culture influences communication, (2) communication reinforces culture, and (3) communication is a way of resisting the dominant culture.<sup>8</sup>

I call this *Tropical Preaching* because societies on the mission field usually lie outside the temperate zones. Cross-cultural proclamation differs from its *monocultural* counterpart more in degree than substance. All communicators struggle to compose relevant messages to diverse audiences within their own societies. Accomplishing this task in another culture adds a further degree of difficulty. Hesselgrave presents Ralph Winter's useful model for describing how meaning transference can differ between cultures.

At Lausanne in 1974 Ralph Winter categorized cross-cultural evangelism as being E-1, E-2, and E-3 evangelism (Later, the category of the category of E-0 evangelism was added.) These categories denote differences based on the degree of "cultural distance" between the evangelist or missionary and respondents in another culture. The difficulty encountered in any particular instance of evangelism (or communication more widely conceived) is directly proportional to the degree of difference between the two cultures involved.<sup>9</sup>

These are helpful distinctions with application for communicators of all stripes. A pastor speaking in his own church would be an example of E-0

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<sup>8</sup> Judith N. Martin & Thomas K. Nakayama, *Experiencing Intercultural Communication*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2005), p. 53.

<sup>9</sup> Hesselgrave, p. 169.

evangelism. If the same pastor preached to a rescue mission or delivered a devotional at a service club, the E-1 category would apply. The E-1 evangelist works with those within his own culture. When a missionary from the United States speaks in Europe or a Korean pastor preaches in Asia, it is an example of E-2 missions. In other words, there is some cultural distance between the speaker and the audience but not much. The greatest communication challenges face a speaker when a wide cultural gap exists between himself and the hearers. This category, E-3 evangelism (or E-3 cross-cultural communication), represents the major thrust of this article.

### I. The Missionary Culture (Source, Speaker, or Preacher)

Mark Dever observes, there is “poignant symbolism at work when one man stands before a congregation to proclaim God’s Word.”<sup>10</sup> The preacher takes on the audacious task of speaking for God and proclaiming His truth to others. I served as senior pastor of two churches in California and Arizona. I always felt inadequate in the role of “herald of truth.” Who was I that a congregation would listen to my words? This discomfort increased exponentially when I arrived on the mission field. As a young missionary with a stumbling grasp of Swahili, Tanzanian pastors looked to me as the authority on Christian doctrine and practice. Often I did not understand their culture nor they mine.

When we arrived in Tanzania our children were small. Our house in the city of Mwanza was nestled at the bottom of a hill. Behind our dwelling we often heard the nighttime screech of leopards, mongoose and monkeys. Perched on top of the hill was an owl’s nest. One day my four-year-old son and seven year old daughter brought me an adolescent owl with a broken wing. My children pleaded with me to nurse it back to health. Like a good father, I carried the owl to a veterinarian who formed a cast for the wing. For several weeks we dutifully fed the owl its daily allotment of meat. One day some believers approached me and tactfully said

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<sup>10</sup> Mark Dever and Greg Gilbert, *Preach*, (Nashville: B & H Publishing Group, 2012), p. 21.

it was not considered appropriate for a missionary to keep an owl as a pet. They explained that traditional *Sukuma* tribesmen believed owls summon sorcerers and witches to their coven meetings.<sup>11</sup> Some wondered if their missionary was a sorcerer instead of a man of God.

Every cross-cultural communicator, before preaching to another culture must first look in the mirror. A new visitor or missionary overseas will be viewed through the prism of age, gender, country of origin, education, position and family status. In the developing world, age is admired and respected while youth is not. Consequently, older speakers often command more of a hearing than younger ones. On the other hand, a young missionary or foreign visitor possessing a high education or prestigious position can also command a hearing. Many missionaries and pastors who travel abroad are relatively young. Their educational credentials and ministry positions, however, command a hearing despite their youth. As the Apostle Paul wrote to Timothy, "Let no one look down on your youthfulness, but *rather* in speech, conduct, love, faith *and* purity, show yourself an example of those who believe."<sup>12</sup>

Other factors also come into play. Married men and women are more respected, generally speaking, than their single counterparts. In addition, strict gender separation frequently prevails in the third world. In the Muslim world females will conduct almost all gospel communication among women. Despite the ambivalence of much of the developing world towards the West, a foreigner often gains a hearing by virtue of his country of origin. This advantage can further the Gospel. A few years ago when I directed our mission's work in E. South America, I visited Paraguay. As a visiting dignitary, I was invited to a private luncheon in the home of the president-elect of the country. In America this would not have occurred.

Such openness to foreigners, however, is not unlimited. Hesselgrave warns, "Let us remember that although missionaries have been commanded by Christ to preach the gospel, they cannot command a hearing. They must win a hearing by demonstrating that they are

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<sup>11</sup> P. Van Pelt, *Bantu Customs in mainland Tanzania*, revised ed., Tabora, (Tanzania: T.M.P. Book Department), p. 74.

<sup>12</sup> II Timothy 4:12 NASB.

people of integrity, credibility, and good will.”<sup>13</sup> The foreign guest must be humble, kind, and absent of any hint of arrogance, condescension, or “know-it-all” attitude. The cross-cultural preacher should keep in mind the words the Apostle Paul to his young disciple Timothy; “The Lord’s bond-servant must not be quarrelsome, but be kind to all, able to teach, patient when wronged.”<sup>14</sup>

Despite these limitations anyone can achieve excellence in the field of intercultural communications. Dale Carnegie identifies only one requirement for good public speaking- a burning desire to communicate a message enthusiastically.<sup>15</sup> Robinson claims, “Sincerity, enthusiasm, and deep earnestness tear down barriers that allow the real self to break free.”<sup>16</sup> This human element overcomes many cross-cultural barriers.

When the missionary or pastor speaks to those of other ethnicities blind spots are inevitable. The speaker assumes the message is getting through but often this is not the case. The late pastor of First Baptist Church, Dallas, Texas, W.A. Criswell famously delivered a sermon in Kenya while serving as President of the Southern Baptist Convention. His message contained repeated references to “the Board”, verbal shorthand for the Foreign (now International) Mission Board, the mission entity of the SBC. His translator rendered *board* as a piece of lumber. The Kenyans wondered why this esteemed pastor talked so much about building materials during his sermon.

On another occasion the president of one of the Baptist state conventions in America travelled to Africa on a mission trip. Harry Mwasanjala, President of the Baptist Convention of Tanzania translated for the visiting preacher. Harry was an older gentleman who spoke English well. Unfortunately, the colloquial expressions of the guest speaker were too much for him. When the pastor said, “Sometimes, you just wake up and have a ‘Blue Monday’,” Mwasanjala abruptly turned around, looked at the preacher and walked off the stage. Spotting a senior

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<sup>13</sup> Hesselgrave, p. 146-147.

<sup>14</sup> II Timothy 2:24, NASB.

<sup>15</sup> Dale Carnegie, *The Dale Carnegie Course in Effective Speaking and Human Relations*, 25<sup>th</sup> ed., (Garden City, NY: Dale Carnegie & Associates, 1968), pp. 64-65.

<sup>16</sup> Haddon W. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980), p. 195.

missionary, Harry said without hostility but with a good deal of frustration, "You translate."

The cross-cultural communicator has the responsibility to insure that the source culture (his culture) does not overwhelm the audience. Martin and Nakayama observe,<sup>17</sup>

Culture is often considered the core concept in intercultural communication. One characteristic of culture is that we may not think about it very much. Trying to understand one's own culture is like trying to explain to a fish that it lives in water. Often, we cannot identify our own cultural backgrounds and assumptions until we encounter people from other cultures, which give us a frame of reference.

This new frame of reference often occurs during one's first speaking trip overseas. The presenter knows he is in a different culture and understands he may have difficulty communicating but does not know why. The famous comments of former U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld ring true.

Now what is the message there? The message is that there are no "knowns." There are things we know that we know. There are known unknowns. That is to say there are things that we now know we don't know. But there are also unknown unknowns. There are things we do not know we don't know.<sup>18</sup>

This is very much the plight of the cross-cultural communicator. He is thrust into a foreign culture, not knowing how much he does not know. The cross-cultural communicator's goal is to proclaim a pure gospel message to an audience of a different society without tainting the sermon's meaning with his own culture. The preacher must divest himself of as many cultural accretions as possible so the message is the focus not the messenger.

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<sup>17</sup> Martin & Nakayama, p. 27

<sup>18</sup> Unlike Donald Rumsfeld, at a Press Conference at NATO HQ, Brussels, Belgium, June 6, 2002, Wikiquotes.



## II. The Bible Culture (the message, speech or address)

Jesus' command in Mark 16:15 summarizes the Christian message, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation." Broadening the charge further, Matthew's Gospel includes making disciples of the nations, baptizing them, and "teaching them to observe all that I [Jesus] commanded you (28:19-20)." The Christian herald, therefore, possesses the entirety of God's word as potential texts. How does the messenger decide what to preach to the nations?

Unlike strictly secular intercultural interaction, the Christian communicator has an advantage. Composed in a non-Western setting, the believer's message, the Bible, is truly cross-cultural. Utilizing the Scriptures insures the preacher of culturally relevant sermons. Expository preaching best fulfills this objective because this kind of proclamation focuses more on the Scriptures than the ideas of the preacher. Robinson says

Expository preaching is the communication of a biblical concept, derived from and transmitted through a historical, grammatical, and literary study of a passage in its context, which the Holy Spirit first applies to the personality and experience of the preacher, through him to his hearers.<sup>19</sup>

Expository preaching assists the proclaimer in avoiding many cultural errors because the Bible comes from a Middle Eastern context. The Western preacher must then first learn the Bible culture and in turn, interpret the Biblical meaning to a third world audience.

"Every sermon should have a theme and the theme should be the theme of the portion of scripture on which it is based," Robinson claims.<sup>20</sup> The Biblical text should provide both the content and the structure for the sermon. Ben Awbrey says, "An expository sermon is a text driven sermon and a text driven sermon must include a text driven

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<sup>19</sup> Haddon W. Robinson, p. 20.

<sup>20</sup> William Briggance, in Robinson, p. 34

structure for the sermon.”<sup>21</sup> When preaching cross-culturally the selection of theme and Bible passage are especially challenging.

In my opening illustration, I chose the “women at the well” passage from John 4 because my audience consisted of tribesmen whose women still drew water from wells. Although technologically sound, my application failed to take into account the gender restrictions (men speaking with women) in *Samburu* society. So what kind of scriptures and themes are appropriate in *tropical preaching*? The following passage in the Pastoral Epistles serves well in third world settings.

The things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, entrust these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also. Suffer hardship with me, as a good soldier of Christ Jesus. No soldier in active service entangles himself in the affairs of everyday life, so that he may please the one who enlisted him as a soldier. Also, if anyone competes as an athlete, he does not win unless he competes according to the rules. The hard-working farmer ought to be the first to receive the share of the crops (2 Tim. 2:2-6).

This passage fits most societies because soldiers, athletes and farmers are common roles everywhere. When I was teaching this scripture to a group of pastors in Myanmar recently, I asked, “Who here has been a soldier?” Only one pastor in the group had served as a soldier but eagerly shared his experiences. Then I inquired, “Who is an athlete here?” Everyone immediately pointed to the best soccer player in the room. A similar reaction transpired when I asked, “Who is the best farmer?” Everyone turned toward a middle-aged man who smiled at the compliment. Their enthusiastic engagement indicated I had selected a relevant passage for this agrarian society. Another text that suits farming societies is the Parable of the Sower in Matthew 13:1-23.

If I were speaking in a coastal community, I might chose Matthew 4:19 where Jesus’ disciples are exhorted to become “fishers of men.” Seafaring societies might also identify with the “sorting the catch” parable in Matthew 14:47 where Jesus said, “the kingdom of heaven is

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<sup>21</sup> Ben Awbrey, *How Effective Sermons Advance*, (Eugene, OR: Resource Publications, 2011), p. 31.

like a dragnet cast into the sea, and gathering fish of every kind.” Experiences like mine resonate with cultures that derive a living from the sea.

When I was 16, I accompanied my step-grandfather on a fishing expedition. “Blackie,” as he was known, was a commercial fisherman in West Bay, near Panama City, Florida. I soon learned that commercial fishing had little in common with the recreational variety. Grandpa’s 25’ diesel powered fishing vessel came equipped with a hydraulic net that was dropped from the stern of the boat. Blackie, two employees and I carefully lowered the net and repeatedly drew it into the boat. The backbreaking work began at 11:00pm and lasted until dawn. I accompanied my grandfather commercial fishing just that one time. After this experience Robin Hadaway decided he would go into another line of work.

The whole counsel of God must be proclaimed but the preacher should begin his international ministry with simpler passages until he gains more experience in cross-cultural settings. The wise preacher will avoid sermons with Western structures, American illustrations or folksy colloquial expressions. Expository Bible messages are always appropriate but selecting the proper one aids cross-cultural communication immensely. No Biblical passage is off-limits but the simpler the better is a good rule for a beginner.

### III. Mission field culture (Respondent, Audience)

The Apostle Paul was an amazing person for many reasons. Engel and Norton claim he “was both message- and audience-centered.”<sup>22</sup> Although the content of the message is of paramount importance to the process of communication, identifying with the audience comes in a close second. According to Hesselgrave, “The word *communication* comes from the Latin word *communis* (common). We must establish a

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<sup>22</sup> James F. Engel & Wilbert Norton, *What’s Gone Wrong with the Harvest?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1982), p. 24.

‘commonness’ with someone to have communication. The ‘commonness’ is found in mutually shared codes.”<sup>23</sup> The difficulty with cross-cultural communication is that the symbols are different. Even if the words are translated the meaning can be “lost in translation.” The gap between a speaker and an audience becomes a chasm when the respondents are of a different culture. Engels and Norton observe,

Jesus and His followers have provided a compelling example. They always began with a keen understanding of the audience and then adapted the message to the other person without compromising God’s Word. The pattern they followed is as pertinent today as it was two thousand years ago.<sup>24</sup>

Today this adaptation is called contextualization. Moreau defines the term, “Contextualization means that the message is defined by Scripture but shaped by culture”.<sup>25</sup> The speaker must craft the presentation of the Gospel so it is understood by a society. Culture should not dominate the message but only carry the Gospel content. I do not support the cultural relativist position that claims “any cultural behavior can be judged only within the cultural context in which it occurs.”<sup>26</sup> However, the study of societies assists the preacher in learning about his target audience. Skinner aptly notes, “Any speaker who assumes that his audience thinks and feels exactly as he does will always be wrong.”<sup>27</sup> This is even truer when addressing internationals. The following sociological insights have important implication for intercultural communication.

Martin and Nakayama observe that American culture places a high value on “doing”. For this reason productivity and busyness are admired in the United States. Central and South American, Greek and Spanish societies seem to value “being.” These cultures tend to live “in the moment” and prize self-actualization. A third orientation exhibited by some Asian countries is the “growing” mentality. These cultures seek

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<sup>23</sup> Hesselgrave. p. 46

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* p. 35.

<sup>25</sup> A. Scott Moreau, *Contextualization in World Missions*, (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2012). p. 35

<sup>26</sup> Martin and Nakayama, p. 19.

<sup>27</sup> Craig Skinner, *The Teaching Ministry of the Pulpit*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1981), p. 95.

spiritualistic and esthetic expression.<sup>28</sup> Often North American preachers craft “doing” messages for “being” or “growing” audiences resulting more in bewilderment than disagreement. My experience captures the cultural divide between Eastern and Western ways of thinking.

When I served as a missionary in Tanzania I had to go to the income tax office periodically for tax clearance. Without a stamp in my passport I could not leave the country, so it was quite important. During an especially long wait I struck up a conversation with a foreign aid worker from the Japanese consulate. I knew no Japanese and he no English so we spoke in Swahili, an interesting cultural experience in itself. I asked him what job he was performing in Mwanza, Tanzania’s second largest city. My new friend said he was a horticulturist and his job was planting flowers in the traffic circles all over the city. The Japanese worker informed me that one of the goals of his government was to beautify the country and thereby bring harmony and peace to the nation. Whereas, the American and European foreign aid programs concentrated on building roads, bridges, and port facilities, the Japanese spent their money on pretty flowers. Of course, when the aid worker completed his assignment and returned to Japan, I noticed the flowers all died because the Tanzanians care nothing about them.

This experience demonstrated to me how much my worldview differed from my Japanese friend. Our presuppositions, categories, and orientation to life had little in common.

Besides the “doing,” “being” and “growing” construct mentioned above, Roland Muller suggests another three-part model for analyzing societies. His paradigm proposes that whereas Western societies view the world from a *guilt-innocence* perspective much of the developing world holds to a *shame-honor* orientation, especially the Middle East and N. Africa. Muller also notes that cultures such as those in tropical Africa and Asia follow a *fear-power* perspective. He also allows for multiple mental constructs.

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<sup>28</sup> Martin & Nakayama, pp. 38-39.

When analyzing a culture, one must look for the primary cultural characteristic, then the secondary ones. As an example, many North American Native cultures are made up of both **shame**-based and **fear**-based cultures. On the other hand, much of North American culture has been made up almost exclusively of **guilt**-based principles, although this has changed in the last two decades. . . The mixing of worldviews is especially noticeable in South America where jungle tribes with **fear**-based cultures come in contact with **shame**-based cultures originating out of Southern Spain, and **guilt**-based cultures brought by western missionaries and western business. The goal of this book is to simply introduce the idea of **guilt**, **shame**, and **fear**-based cultures, and then to examine how the gospel is best communicated in its entirety [bold mine].<sup>29</sup>

As a young missionary in Western Tanzania, I selected Biblical texts and preached messages unconsciously aligning them with my Western guilt-innocence worldview. My sermons were fine but I did not know my *Sukuma* tribe audience feared the crocodile god in Lake Victoria and prayed to their ancestors for protection. I might have better touched the society's felt needs if I had preached initially from the Book of 1<sup>st</sup> John rather than from the Gospel of John. John wrote, "The Son of God appeared for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil (1 John 3:8)" and "There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves punishment, and the one who fears is not perfected in love (1 John 4:18)." Both of these passages speak to the fear-power worldview and could be used to good advantage by the missions speaker.

My seminary colleague Tom Johnston taught at a Baptist seminary in Togo, West Africa during a sabbatical a few years ago. His son Jonathan accompanied him on the trip. Jonathan told me his father was asked an interesting question during a class. The pastor asked, "What do you do when your church is full of sorcerers?" Such questions from a fear-power worldview are seldom asked in America.

Speaking about the Middle Eastern worldview, Patai says, "One of the important differences between Arab and the Western personality

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<sup>29</sup> Roland Muller, *Honor and Shame*, (Xlibris, 2000), pp. 20-21.

is that in Arab culture, shame is more pronounced than guilt.<sup>30</sup> In my opinion a Gospel presentation to Arabs should first be based on the many “shame” verses in the Bible before other passages are presented. In I Corinthians 1:27 [bold mine] Paul wrote, “but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to **shame** the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to **shame** the things that are strong.” Another instance surfaces in Luke 9:26 [bold mine] when Jesus says, “For whoever is **ashamed** of Me and My words, the Son of Man will be **ashamed** of him when He comes in His glory, and the glory of the Father and of the holy angels.” The following event occurred on a trip I took to West Africa a few years ago.

I travelled to a remote cluster of houses in a rural area of a West Africa country. Volunteers from an American church told stories from the “Creation to Christ” series of oral messages to a group of Muslim men. After a message delivered by one of Americans, the men were asked if they wanted to “accept Christ.” A number of the men indicated that they wanted to respond to the Gospel message. I politely asked if I could say a word. Turning to the men I asked, “how many of you want to accept Christ and show you mean it by taking down the family fetish hanging above you?” Only one young man raised his hand. His father, a leader in the village, said, “It’s hard.” The fetish had been passed down from generation to generation and not honoring the charm would shame his family and ancestors.

The Book of Hebrews is an excellent source of Bible texts that communicate with both shame-honor and fear-power societies. In fact, for the cross-cultural communicator, the Book of Hebrews presents as the most effective link between Western culture and the worldview of respondent audiences abroad. Hebrews 12:2 [bold mine] describes Jesus as “the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the **shame**, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.” Hebrews 2:9 says [bold mine), “But we do see Him who has been made for a little while lower than the angels, namely,

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<sup>30</sup> R. Patai, *The Arab Mind*, revised ed., (New York: Hatherleigh Press, 2002), p.113.

Jesus, because of the suffering and death crowned with glory and honor, so that by the grace of God He might taste death of everyone.”

Although Muslims reject the historicity of the crucifixion and the possibility of the prophet Jesus dying, they understand the concepts of **shame and honor** implicit in these Biblical passages. Evangelists can use these Scriptures to communicate Christian truths to Muslims.<sup>31</sup>

Besides these broad sociological categories, there are a few additional aspects for the cross-cultural communicator to remember. Most nationals do not have cars, computers, dishwashers, or washing machines. References to one's affluent American lifestyle will increase the already large gap between the speaker and the audience. An illustration about a father buying a son or daughter a car would be incomprehensible to someone in the third world. Carefully choose one's words.

Of course, the career missionary living overseas should learn the local language. Visitors will have to use translators but must employ simple English, realizing most English overseas is usually of the British variety. The language barrier is only part of the problem. Even with the best of translators, the world-view of the hearer may be so different from the speaker, communication “misses” occur. Discover the paralinguistic foundations of preaching in your host country. These include pitch, pace, intonation, volume and inflection.<sup>32</sup> For instance, many cultures believe raising one's voice is rude.

Non-verbal communication such as gestures can also be problematic. I learned that when an index finger is pointed at someone in Tanzania one has hatched a plot to kill the indicated person. Conversely, some cultures point with their chins or lips rather than with their fingers. In Africa heterosexual men “hold hands” to demonstrate their friendship where in the West only homosexuals do so. The first time a Tanzanian pastor held my hand, my skin crawled. What he was

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<sup>31</sup> Robin Dale Hadaway, *Contextualization and Folk Islam: A Case Study in the Sudan*, Unpublished doctoral dissertation, (Pretoria: The University of South Africa, 2011), p. 231.

<sup>32</sup> Hesselgrave, p. 48



attempting to communicate non-verbally (friendship) was not what I was receiving (stark terror).

Carefully craft illustrations, weeding out examples unique to American culture. Audiences abroad have never heard of American college or professional sports teams. They follow Manchester United or Real Madrid soccer teams in the European league. References to and expressions from American football and baseball games will result in blank stares. In addition, steer clear of political comments critical of either American or foreign politicians or dignitaries. In Sudan nationals often tell Arabic jokes about their dictator whereas in Southeast Asia any negative remark about the King of Thailand by foreigner or national will result in a long prison term. Rather, find illustrations that harmonize with the host culture. While living in North Africa I related the story about the *Samburu* tribesmen and the "Woman at the Well." Although the event happened in East Africa the narrative communicated because the tale fit their culture.

Observe practices and habits unique to the society. For instance, Indians often wobble their heads when speaking. Eritreans take a deep breath as a way of acknowledging someone speaking in the flow of conversation. South Americans and Italians greet one another with air kisses on the cheek, one, two or three times, depending on the country. When I travelled often in Eastern South America, I had to remind myself when greeting others to kiss twice on the cheek in Paraguay and only once in Brazil.

The most important part of preparation is to carefully research the respondent culture, especially when the society differs greatly from that of the guest. Read a book about the nation and ethnicity of the audience. Become as much of an expert on the society as possible before one's arrival. By doing so the speaker will tailor an effective Biblical message unique to the audience thereby reaping rich rewards for the Gospel of Christ in the process. There is one additional fact about preaching abroad the Christian speaker will appreciate. Audiences overseas generally enjoy long sermons and are usually disappointed with messages lasting less than an hour.

## Conclusion

This article has sought to examine Christian cross-cultural communication. Hesselgrave says,

“Many educators have come to the position that cross-cultural communication is a *sin qua non* for citizenship in this new world. Missionaries now understand that much more than a microphone and increased volume is involved in penetrating cultural barriers.”<sup>33</sup> If the Christian communicator will research the culture and worldview of the respondent society and adjust the presentation accordingly, the timeless gospel message will be effectively conveyed across wide cultural chasms. Since the goal of the Christian communicator is to represent our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and in His words, “teach all things I have commanded you” to all the nations across the world, we can do no less.

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<sup>33</sup> Hesselgrave, p. 97.