

THE GOSPEL IN A WORLD OF CULTURES

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INTRODUCTION

Very few Christians would deny that the gospel is at the heart of Christian missions. Yet, when asked to define the gospel, many would struggle to come up with a concrete and non-controversial answer. The answer given would be influenced by one's cultural context, including, among other things, language, family expectations, previous exposure to religion, social morality standards, and norms of behaviour. This has led Lesslie Newbigin to argue that, "The idea that one can or could at any time separate out by some process of distillation a pure gospel unadulterated by any cultural accretions is an illusion."¹ The challenge to present the gospel to every culture in a way that is both biblical and relevant is a great challenge of Christian missions today.

THE GOOD NEWS

Newbigin draws attention to the fact that the gospel is essentially the Good News of Jesus, the Word made flesh. He went through the ultimate incarnation, taking human form so that He could live among those to whom He was sent. Newbigin further argues that:

to separate a pure gospel, unadulterated by cultural accretions . . . is, in fact, an abandonment of the gospel, for the gospel is about the word made flesh. Every statement of the gospel, in words conditioned by the culture, of which those words are a part, and

¹ Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks* (London UK: SPCK, 1986), p. 4.

every style of life that claims to embody the truth of the gospel is a culturally-conditioned style of life . . . there can never be a culture-free gospel.²

Newbigin clearly explains that the gospel, as understood by humans, is understood within the context of one's culture. Paul Hiebert, a leading proponent of anthropological understanding in missions, says this:

The gospel belongs to no culture. It is God's revelation of Himself, and His acts to all people. On the other hand, it must always be understood and expressed within human cultural forms. There is no way to communicate it, apart from human thought patterns and languages. Moreover, God has chosen to use humans as the primary means for making Himself known to other others. Even when He chose to reveal Himself to us, He did so most fully by becoming a man, who lived within the context of human history, and a particular culture.³

No student of the Bible will deny the importance of understanding the cultural climate of 1st-century Palestine when attempting to understand the gospel. For 1st-century Jews, God was יהוה (YHWH), a holy sovereign God to be feared. When Jesus referred to God as אבא (Abbā – 'Αββᾶ in Greek) (Mark 14:36, NIV), an Aramaic term roughly meaning "Daddy", this was a completely revolutionary way of thinking⁴. Jesus' incarnation and sacrifice changed forever the way that God's people related to Him. Without a general understanding of Jewish culture in Bible times, the significance of this change in thinking would be lost. Thus, Paul Hiebert comes to this conclusion:

² Ibid.

³ Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries* (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Book House, 1985), p. 30.

⁴ "Αββᾶ", in *TDNT* 1.5-6 (originally published in Germany in *TWNT* 1.5-6 (1933). As referenced in D'Angelo, Mary Rose, "'Αββᾶ and 'Father': Imperial Theology and the *Jesus* Traditions", in *Journal of Biblical Literature* 111 (Winter 1992), p. 611.

Clearly we need to understand the gospel in its historical and cultural setting. Without this, we have no message. We also need a clear understanding of ourselves, and the people we serve, in diverse historical and cultural contexts. Without this, we are in danger of proclaiming a meaningless and irrelevant message.⁵

CULTURAL CONTEXTUALISATION

While Newbigin's theory is very helpful, to a certain extent, one must be careful not to carry this idea of cultural contextualisation too far. Hiebert reminds us that culture, like all other human institutions, is capable of great elements of sin:

Among these are slavery, apartheid, oppression, exploitation, and war. The gospel condemns these, just as it judges the sins of individuals. . . . Kenneth Scott Latourette points out: "It must be noted that Christianity, if it is not hopelessly denatured, never becomes fully at home in any culture. Always, when it is true to its genius, it creates a tension."⁶

Therefore, culture must be subject to critical analysis, when attempting to present the gospel in a way that is culturally appropriate. The nature of the gospel is transformational. It should not be mindlessly adapted to conform to the culture. This invariably will lead to the great problems in Christian mission today: the issues of syncretism and pluralism. Instead, Dean Gilliland gives this definition of biblical contextualisation:

In the process of contextualisation, the church, through the Holy Spirit, continually challenges, incorporates, and transforms elements of the culture in order to bring them under the lordship of Christ. As believers, in a particular place, reflect upon the Word,

⁵ Hiebert, *op cit.*, p. 14.

⁶ *Op cit.*, p. 56

through their own thoughts, employing their own cultural gifts, they are better able to understand the gospel as incarnation.⁷

Newbigin's theory has certainly not been the norm in historical Christian thought. From the Nicene Creed to the contemporary "sinner's prayer", there have been countless attempts to figure out a concise gospel message. Formulated in the West, these gospel outlines have focused on a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, emphasising human sinful nature, and subsequent justification through grace by faith, which leads to eternal fellowship with the Saviour⁸. In our individualistic society, this technique has often proved to be successful, leading to the idea that this particular way of presenting the gospel was the only way to present the gospel.

This method of evangelism is helpful to a certain extent. Its rigid nature does not often give way to further syncretism. Although inadequate in equipping Christians with a full understanding of the gospel, the foundational truths presented in these gospel outlines are undeniably biblical. Along these lines, the Bible always affirms that there is a definitive gospel that applies to every person in every culture. Paul is especially clear about this in his epistles:

But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned! As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned! . . . I want you to know, brothers, that the gospel I preached is not something that man made up. I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ (Gal 1:8, 9, 11, 12).

⁷ Dean Gilliland, "Contextualisation", in Moreau, S., ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions* (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Reference Library, 2000), p. 226.

⁸ "How to Become a Christian", in *Southern Baptist Convention*, <http://www.sbc.net/knowjesus/theplan.asp>. Accessed on January 14, 2008.

Yet, nowhere in the Bible will one find a particular way to present this gospel. Although Paul always preaches the gospel, his presentations of the gospel are never identical. He tells the Philippian jailer to “Believe in the Lord, and you will be saved” (Acts 16:31). To the philosophers on Mars Hill, Paul explains that Jesus is Lord, the supreme “Unknown God” (Acts 17:23). To the eager disciples of John, Paul shows that John’s baptism was simply a precursor to baptism in the name of the Lord Jesus (Acts 19:4). Thus, the gospel, by nature, is so comprehensive that it cannot be explained in the same way in every circumstance.

Samuel Escobar explains the dangers of trying to manufacture a certain way of presenting the gospel. He relates this story of failed contextualisation in African culture:

In African culture, the way in which man can be man is within the family. The African culture knows no isolated individuals. Man is man, because he belongs. He is a part of a larger family, a clan or a tribe. Hence, John Mbiti says, “I am, because we are.” As a member of a family man cannot be left to his own. . . . In some parts of Africa, the Christian gospel has been preached as if it were relevant only to an isolated individual. A person has to make an individual decision to accept Christ. This is an importation of individualistic cultural thinking of the West. The Philippian jailer (Acts 16) was baptised in the middle of the night with his household. Whenever an African person wants to make an important decision, he has to consult the whole family. Our evangelism in Africa must be aimed at families, and groups of people.⁹

Undoubtedly, Newbigin has brought to light a key aspect of biblical mission: that the gospel must be relevant to one’s culture, in order to be truly life changing. The New Testament gives us many examples of this. However, one must be careful, to the extent in which the gospel can be

⁹ David Gitari, as quoted in Samuel Escobar, *The New Global Mission: The Gospel from Everywhere to Everyone* (Downers Grove IL: IVP, 2003), p. 140.

“adulterated” with “cultural accretions”, while still remaining the gospel. Before long, the gospel can become vague, giving way to religious pluralism. On the other hand, one must also be careful to not relegate the gospel to an evangelistic talk that takes five minutes to explain. Both lead to an either inaccurate or incomplete view of the gospel, the Good News of Jesus Christ.

CONCLUSION

Therefore, it is not an issue of whether the gospel must always be marred by cultural accretions. Rather, we must recognise the fact that the gospel transcends all cultures. When Jesus spoke of living water to the Samaritan women, but of a new birth to Nicodemus, He was not speaking of two altered gospels. Alteration implies change. Rather, the nature of the gospel is so powerful that it is able to speak to, and transform, any culture. The gospel that Paul preached is the same good news that we are called to preach, but this does not mean that it will always be presented the same way. Perhaps the best way to sum up a model of biblical, and relevant evangelism, is through the words of this ancient Chinese proverb: “Go to the people, live among them, learn from them, love them. Start with what they know, and build on what they have.”¹⁰

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¹⁰ As quoted in Darrell Whiteman, “Anthropology and Mission: The Incarnational Connection (Part II)”, in *Global Missiology, Research Methodology* (July 2004), www.globalmissiology.net. Accessed on January 11, 2008.

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