

# How Shall They Hear the Gospel?

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## Introduction

Voices all around me are shouting in several languages. Some are explaining why the current US president is a great leader; others are telling me that he has failed the American people. Some are telling me what the weather will be like, others want me to know which roads have traffic snarls, and yet others are trying to convince me to buy my groceries at their store. Music of every style is blaring all round the room: hard rock, rap, hip-hop, jazz, classical, easy listening, country, and bluegrass. Fortunately, I cannot hear the cacophony; it is in the form of radio frequencies that my ears cannot detect. I would have to turn on a radio receiver and tune it to a desired station to hear any of the intended messages. The greatest programming from the most creative minds is lost on me. Such is also the case with much preaching of the gospel. It goes out in culturally inappropriate ways that make sense only to the preacher.

*This* miscommunication, however, is of crucial significance because there is no salvation apart from the gospel message. The glory of God and the eternal destinies of billions of souls are in the balance. In Rom 1:16-17 Paul states, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, 'The righteous shall live by faith.'"<sup>1</sup> This passage, a favorite of many people, speaks of the great blessing of our salvation, but with such great privilege

comes great responsibility. The Bible also charges us to fulfill the Great Commission to reach and teach all people groups.

Jesus taught us through His encounter with Nicodemus that we must be born again (John 3:1-16). Paul implored the church in Corinth to be reconciled to God (2 Cor 5:17-6:2). He stressed that we must respond with a positive profession of faith in Christ upon hearing the gospel message. Yet in Rom 10:14 Paul raises questions that should haunt every Christian: "But how are they to call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?" It is essential that the gospel message go out to the ends of the earth.

The gospel message is indeed going out around the world. Faithful missionaries and dedicated preachers are heralding the good news across the seas and across the street. This communication of the word has been going on in greater or lesser degrees since the first century. The fact that it was the Lord Himself who gave us the command to preach the gospel, that it is essential for the salvation of lost souls, that it extends His kingdom, and that it brings glory to Him, should result in every effort to fulfill it. Yet, two thousand years later one-third of the planet has still not heard the gospel. *Missions Frontiers* magazine reports that there are 27,000 people groups in the world today.<sup>2</sup> Of that number, 13,000 are still unreached people groups.<sup>3</sup> One-third of the world's population, over two billion people, has

never heard the gospel. There remains much to do and the task requires every effort of faithful Christians.

Joshua was one of the more faithful leaders in Israel's history. Moses' helper had grown into an able leader and God chose him to lead His people in the conquest of Canaan. Toward the end of his earthly years the Lord spoke to him, "Now Joshua was old and advanced in years, and the Lord said to him, "You are old and advanced in years, and there remains yet very much land to possess" (Josh 13:1). We have had much more time than Joshua had and many more resources besides, but there remains "yet very much land to possess." Some would counter that it is virtually impossible to take the gospel to every continent, every country, every language, and every culture. The languages alone make the task seem insurmountable.

Yet, the peoples of the world are regularly adopting new ideas that come to them. In May of 1886, Dr. John S. Pemberton began to sell a sugary drink of colored water in Atlanta, Georgia. He called it Coca-Cola. His first year's sales were only about fifty dollars and since his expenses were about seventy dollars, he took a loss. Since that time, Coca-Cola has increased in sales in unprecedented degrees and has gone from its meager beginnings to global acclaim. Ninety-five percent of the world's population recognizes the Coca-Cola trademark and product.<sup>4</sup>

If taking an idea to the world can be done for profit, it can be done for the glory of God. Certainly, men and women have been busy at the task. We are broadcasting the gospel message all around the globe, but often we are transmitting in a frequency that the people of the world cannot hear. How can we ensure that the

proclamation of the gospel will be heard and understood? We must make every effort to be good communicators of the gospel in every culture.

There is a vast difference between commentators and communicators of the biblical message. One may read the commentaries of Matthew Henry or John Calvin and find nuggets of truth that were mined hundreds of years ago, but neither writer attempted to apply the truth of God's word in the culture of the United States in the twenty-first century. They left us to make our own application. Indeed, a commentator must do this as he does not live in all of the cultural contexts of each of his readers—even in his own time—much less those in the future. He simply unpacks the truths that are in the text which then become so many ingredients for the meals that the pastors prepare and feed their flocks. Commentators write about the basic truths of God's word and do not concern themselves with applying them in all the diverse cultures and world-views. Communicators of God's word are not allowed this luxury.

Communicators must concern themselves with both biblical truth and the sending of it in culturally understandable ways. They do this by transmitting the message in a mutually accepted coded system that the hearers will understand; in fact, this is the *sine qua non* of their discipline. The essence of effective communication is speaking the truth in a way that thoughts in the speaker's mind are encoded, sent, decoded, and accepted into the respondent's mind with roughly the same message. In recent decades, research, reflection, analysis, and God's blessing have resulted in approaches to the task that are more effective. However, such techniques are certainly not

completely new. Numbers 13 records the command of the Lord for Israel to send spies into the land of Canaan to see what kind of people lived there, what kind of cities they lived in, and what kind of food they ate. A similar event occurs in Joshua 2. This ethnographic research was reconnaissance for the purpose of conquest. Ethnographic research today employs similar tactics for studying people groups for the purpose of kingdom growth. The general field of missions has developed into specialized fields of study in areas like ethnographic research and communication in intercultural contexts.

Intercultural studies is a discipline employed by seminaries and universities to train those who will live and work among various cultures—in the United States or in other countries. While cultural anthropology and intercultural studies are terms that may conjure up images of pith helmets and field notebooks or social scientists hugging trees, they are simply proven tools for understanding, living among, and communicating with people from different cultural backgrounds. In fact, many seminaries have renamed their missions departments as schools of intercultural studies or have major programs of intercultural studies in their missions programs. An appreciation of the value of cultural anthropology as a useful tool in communicating with others has been growing among evangelicals for decades. One of Christianity's greatest gospel communicators, Dr. Billy Graham, majored in anthropology while at Wheaton College.

One of the divisions of intercultural studies is intercultural communication. The purpose of this article is to address the value of the discipline of intercultural communication for proclaiming the gospel. This will be accomplished

by considering its biblical basis, historical implications, benefits for linguistics, value for understanding worldviews and cultures, recognition of the unique needs of oral cultures, and the missiological strategies and methodologies that flow out of these. In such a short article, I can only introduce these areas along with a few examples to demonstrate some of the benefits of intercultural communication. Understanding and incorporating intercultural communication tools are essential for effectively communicating the gospel, whether as missionaries in international contexts or as pastors of churches in the United States.

### **Biblical Basis**

Those of us who love the Scriptures should be the first to notice the tools of intercultural communication at work. The fact that we have a Bible that we can read and understand proves that this process has occurred in our past since the essence of intercultural communication is putting a message in terms that someone in another culture can understand. We speak freely about the incarnation of Christ as an essential for our redemption but often overlook the fact that His written word also came to us in a system that we could understand. John Calvin says that the Bible is God speaking to us as a parent speaking to a young child in baby talk.<sup>5</sup> Since God's thoughts are above our own and infinitely wise, He spoke to us in ways that we could hear and understand.

For example, Jesus used parables and illustrations from everyday life as windows into the truths He was teaching. He also understood that the vast majority of his hearers were common people and were illiterate. Oral-culture people learn, communicate, and remember truth best in

narrative form.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, Jesus did not lecture them with steps, outlines, bullet points, or even expository sermons; He taught them in stories.

In Luke 15 Jesus presents three stories to his oral-culture hearers that teach one primary truth rather than a three-point sermon that required deductive reasoning skills. The stories of the lost coin, the lost sheep, and the lost son all teach that the thing that was lost was precious to the one who lost it and that there was great rejoicing when it was found. His hearers could not avoid the truth He was driving home: They were precious to God and He would rejoice when they came home. In our churches, Jesus would probably deliver a three-point, expository sermon, illustrate it well, and draw it to a wonderful conclusion. However, Jesus knew that they could not process information in that format, so He spoke to them in the way that was most effective.

Paul and Barnabas also found that preaching the gospel is more complicated the farther you get away from your home culture. He and Barnabas preached in Lystra and saw God work in their ministry by healing a man (Acts 14:6-18). It should encourage other intercultural communicators of Christ's message that even the super apostle struggled to make himself understood. When their hearers began to attempt sacrifices in their honor and began shouting praise in the Lycaonian language, they knew that something had gone terribly awry. The message sometimes gets confused in the minds of the hearers—especially when there is a language barrier to start with.

Rather than dissuading Paul from going to unreached and unfamiliar peoples, this experience convinced him to learn to make the necessary cultural

adjustments for effective missionary service and Christian ministry. His clearly stated goal was to preach Christ where He had not been named (Rom 15:20, 21). How would he accomplish this? Would he go as a rabbi and argue from the Hebrew Scriptures with fellow monotheists who knew God's word, as in the case of his synagogue work, or would he go as a preacher of the gospel among polytheistic pagans? He would have to do both. How could he avoid the confusion of Lystra in the future? Paul understood the only answer.

Paul stated his intended strategy in 1 Cor 9:22; he would be all things to all men so as to save some. Of course, Paul is not saying that he would become drunk to be an effective witness to drunks. He was simply saying that in every way that was not sin for him, he would adapt to the culture so that he might communicate the gospel effectively among them.

In the context of Paul's teaching on the use of tongues, he speaks of the necessity to sound the gospel message clearly. He reminds us that in battle, the bugler must sound a clear alarm or no one will get ready for battle (1 Cor 14:8). This speaks of the need for clear communication. Later in that passage, Paul says that he would rather speak five words that people can understand than ten thousand that only he can understand (1 Cor 14:19). I believe that we can apply this principle to the need for clear communication of the gospel interculturally. We must proclaim this great gospel message to every person in the world, as there is no other way for men and women to be saved. Therefore, since this message is both unique and essential, it is of utmost importance that we communicate in ways that people can "hear."

This dynamic rebounds in blessings to our own understanding of the Scriptures. As we disciple new believers and the Holy Spirit illumines their minds to truths in God's word, hitherto unseen teachings often become known. Since cultures understand the gospel message in their own cultural context and within their own worldview, this means that they will see and understand certain truths or nuances that other cultures do not. I want to be very clear; there is only one meaning of the Scriptures. However, one culture may see the story in black and white, another in hues of blue, another in hues of green, and another in hues of red. Together we can see the beauty of previously hidden or unnoticed colors. Last year I visited the Guggenheim Museum in New York. One of the exhibits consisted of four sheets of clear glass, about one-meter square, leaning against a wall. The title of the piece was, "Clear, square, glass, leaning."<sup>7</sup> At the time, it struck me as odd that an artist could make a living like this. However, as I reflected on it, the message became obvious: Each of the words describes one truth of the exhibit but none was exhaustive. When we consider the four descriptors together, their several perspectives yield a fuller understanding of the piece. So it is when the global hermeneutical community studies God's word, each community adds a part overlooked by another.

Let me hasten to add that we do not wish to change the gospel message. Yet, that is precisely what others are in danger of doing. When they fail to contextualize the gospel message, they run the danger of making it the foreigners' religion.<sup>8</sup> Many who communicate Christ in culturally inappropriate ways are changing the gospel message they so desire to protect. What the people actually hear is some-

thing that the preacher never intended to say. Although they mean well, they are presenting the gospel in foreign garments and trappings.

This takes place in many forms. Some churches in Africa have buildings made of red brick, with pews and pianos inside, that meet for Sunday School at 9:30 AM and worship at 11:00 AM simply because that was the kind of "church" that the missionary had at home. Every other structure in the community is made of mud with thatched roofs. Another missionary in Peru requires that Quechua Indians, whose culture only knows music with a five-tone minor scale, learn to worship God singing Scottish metrical psalms. Red brick buildings and metrical psalms may be fine in certain contexts, but when one imports them as virtual essentials of biblical Christianity, one has added to the gospel and made it to be something else.

The failure to contextualize Christianity in culturally appropriate ways results in an importation of something foreign to the gospel message. It becomes the religion of another culture and it teaches that to be a Christian, one must leave one's own culture behind and adopt the missionary's culture. It is indeed correct to say that there is only one meaning of Scripture, but there are many applications. Scripture only has one meaning, but no culture has exhausted its fullness. There is one meaning of Scripture, but we must communicate it in culturally appropriate ways. Few worshipers in evangelical churches today come dressed in first century garb and carrying Hebrew Old Testaments and Greek New Testaments. Nor should we preach in English to a crowded market where no one understands it and then proclaim that we have evangelized the city. We are not simply

to preach the truth as we would at home; we must communicate it in the culture of our hearers. Pastors in the United States practice this to a degree in their churches every week.

In every church, there are many different levels of understanding and spiritual maturity. When the children come forward and sit on the platform for the children's sermon, the pastor will speak in a voice that is fatherly and kind and use short sentences with small words. Then, when he stands to deliver the message to the congregation, he may become very animated and shout. He may emphasize points with wide sweeping gestures and walk around the pulpit. All of which could have seemed threatening to the children. When this same pastor speaks to a luncheon of senior adults, he will adopt yet another delivery style that is appropriate for that group. He may be speaking to each group about the same theme or passage but he seeks to communicate it to them in a way that will be most effective.

### **Historical Implications**

Missionaries have taken the gospel message around the world with varying degrees of success for hundreds of years. Could the failure to communicate the gospel in culturally appropriate ways account for so many years with little or no fruit in the ministries of many missionaries? The pages of mission history are replete with accounts of missionaries who have gone to historically "hard" cultures. Missionaries have often suffered there for years without fruit. Names like William Carey, who labored for seven years before his first convert, or Adoniram Judson, who likewise preached and suffered long years in apparent barrenness, spring

to mind. A less known missionary was Julia Woodward Anderson who began living and working among the Highland Quichuas of Ecuador in 1902. When she retired in 1955, over fifty years later, the first three Highland Quichua believers were baptized.<sup>9</sup>

Could it be that these missionaries were operating in their own cultural paradigms and patterns without awareness of the need for cultural understanding? Could it be that since they were lacking in cultural anthropological or intercultural communication understanding, they were preaching the gospel as they would in their home contexts? We certainly do not want to denigrate or belittle their ministries and we recognize them as heroes of mission history. They were, after all, children of their times and most of the Christians in those times were not aware of the tools we commonly make available to missionary candidates today. Nevertheless, is it possible that their efforts might have found fruit more readily if they had been able to utilize these skills?

It seems logical that over a period of years their language skills would have improved, their cultural understanding would have deepened, and initial stereotypes and prejudices would have given way as counter intuitive data yielded to a fuller cultural understanding. As this process continued, their ability to communicate the gospel so that it could be "heard" would have been honed and refined. Almost imperceptibly, they would have adopted and adapted communication patterns of the target cultures so that they eventually became effective communicators. Moreover, while this certainly does not mitigate the hard, stony ground that some cultures prove to be, it could be that the farther removed the

target culture was from the missionary's home culture, the more difficult it was in reality. Julia Woodward Anderson's fellow missionaries who served in the Mestizo cultures of Guayaquil and Quito certainly found more receptive hearers than she found in the Highland Quichua work—a dynamic that continues today.<sup>10</sup>

Of course, how many times one hears the gospel before one "hears" the gospel is a question that can be answered only in the work of the Holy Spirit. The same crowd at a Billy Graham crusade hears the same message in the same stadium on the same night in the same temperature and humidity. Yet, of the lost people present, many will go home still lost. Only the Holy Spirit can make the preaching of the word effectual in the hearts of men and women.

In the annals of mission history, we must acknowledge that some have hardened hearts and live in hard, dark cultures. In some cases the lack of fruit must certainly be due to hard soil, in others though, it is due to culturally inappropriate presentations of the gospel. Although this touches a revered part of mission history, a harder question remains. Could this failure to communicate clearly be a part of the reason for much martyrdom in mission history?

This begins to tread on hallowed ground, and so we tread lightly and with great respect. Perhaps we need more than one category of martyr. In recent examinations of the tens of thousands of Christian martyrs reported each year, research shows that many victims in these great numbers are ethnic Christians.<sup>11</sup> There is ethnic violence in parts of the world such as Africa where the inhabitants of Muslim villages and regions are attacking and killing those in Christian villages and

regions—and sometimes vice versa. Often these victims are considered Christian martyrs because of their ethnic identity, not their Christian convictions.

Sadly, there are also Christian workers who die in tragic ways around the world every year. Some of these lose their lives in robberies, traffic accidents, or plane crashes. Others die from tropical diseases or the lack of proper medical attention for more common diseases. Are these missionaries martyrs? The question is not whether they are great examples of Christians who selflessly give themselves in Christ's service, but rather, are they martyrs?

Certainly, some missionaries are killed because they refuse an order to cease and desist preaching the gospel message. They lay down their lives because they regard the glory of God and the souls of their hearers as more precious than their own earthly lives. Yet, other missionaries sometimes die in foreign lands because their murderers do not understand their intentions—that is, they are killed because they are not clearly communicating the gospel message. Their gospel message was sometimes not even presented, or if preached, "unheard." Some missionaries innocently blundered into taboo situations and lost their lives because of simple cultural ignorance. Their murderers killed them for being foreigners or because they were considered a threat. Could the knowledge and application of intercultural communication skills have avoided some of the loss of life that has occurred among missionaries in the past? Again, the intention here is not to take away from the memories or testimonies of those who have suffered on the mission fields of the past; it is to avoid accidental suffering in the future.

## Linguistic Considerations

Language is usually what comes to mind when considering the process of making the gospel known among another people group. We know that missionary candidates must attend language school. Yet, language is only one color of the intercultural communication prism. We use many other systems for communication. In fact, studies have shown that verbal language accounts for only a small percentage of what we communicate.<sup>12</sup> Language is a code system to facilitate communication, both in written form and orally. Nevertheless, language does not exist in isolation from other aspects of culture.

Thousands of languages exist in the world today. The globalization and urbanization processes at work in the world today have yielded a juxtaposition of these tongues that results in a virtual tower of Babel in our cities. Everyday, the people living in Manhattan speak 250 languages. Instead of the miracle of Pentecost where visitors to Jerusalem could hear the gospel proclaimed in their own languages, we have the reverse: A myriad of people who do not understand the gospel—each in their own language.

Languages create problems for communication in everyday life and for Christian ministry. In some oriental languages, the word used for “sin” is also the word for crime and “sinner” becomes criminal. This renders great confusion when the Christian witness wants the hearer to admit to being a sinner. It is even worse when the missionary does not know the etymology of the word. Many times the missionary is unaware that a word has many meanings and this creates confusion. Many missionaries go to language school in Costa Rica to prepare for service

elsewhere in Latin America. Words that are innocuous in Costa Rica are crude slang words in their target countries and missionaries must often learn that the hard way. Cultures define behaviors with categories that the missionary may not recognize. The missionary could unwittingly preach against some behavior using one specific word that gives tacit approval to virtually identical behavior that goes by other names.<sup>13</sup> Dialects are another challenge as a country may list the language group with one generic name that has many dialects—oftentimes not mutually intelligible.

The great linguist, Eugene Nida, set forth a model for communicating biblical truth in other cultures. In his tri-cultural translation model, he said that it is imperative to keep in mind three cultures, beginning with the biblical cultures.<sup>14</sup> When interpreting a passage of the Bible, the original cultural context is essential in the grammatico-historical hermeneutics model for obtaining authorial intent. Nida also reminds us of the fact that there is no biblical culture on earth, nor a culture-less manifestation of Christianity. Each culture has expressed Christianity in unique ways that usually become identified with the Scriptures themselves in that culture. Nida warns the missionary of the danger of transplanting cultural forms of Christianity into the target culture. For this reason, he stresses that the missionary not only must know the Bible and its cultural contexts, he must know his own culture to discern what is biblical and what is a cultural form or packaging. He goes on to say that the missionary must also study the culture and language of the target people also in order to avoid syncretism and to communicate the gospel in as clear a manner as possible.



Missionaries must also address the linguistic challenge of idioms when translating or interpreting in other cultures. The translator must be aware of biblical idioms and their English counterparts for proper understanding in translation. Certainly, these exist in modern languages today also. Missionaries often tell short-term mission team members not to use humor in sermons because it will not translate. The same is true for idioms.<sup>15</sup>

Not only do problems occur between languages, but even among various cultures that use the same language communication can be problematic. So many examples have been given of the linguistic differences between the English and Americans that it has often been said that we are two countries divided by a common language. This dynamic is true among Spanish-speaking countries as well. For example, the word for “bus” in Cuba means “baby” in the Andes. There are many other cultural differences between them as well.

Therefore, learning the grammar and vocabulary of another language is just the beginning of communicating effectively in another culture. Non-verbal communication is crucial in culturally appropriate ministry. Donald K. Smith has written about the twelve-signal systems that every culture uses for communication.<sup>16</sup> Cultures have their own way of utilizing each of these signal systems. Missionaries must learn them in context and use them appropriately for effective communication. Cultures rarely use one system in isolation, and it is possible for one to contradict another when communicating. An example would be the “yeah, right” sarcastic response so often heard in our culture where the paralanguage tone of voice contradicts the meaning of

the words.<sup>17</sup>

Other aspects of the linguistic consideration are form and meaning. The dynamic equivalent is what communicates in another culture, not a form that they cannot understand. Yet, there are limits to this freedom.<sup>18</sup> It is obvious that there is no one-to-one correlation between languages in many cases. Because of the inherent strengths and weaknesses in languages, it is often easier to communicate a certain thought in one language than in another.<sup>19</sup>

Some cultures have divided the color spectrum into seven, others into four, and some cultures have no real words for color, only the ideas of dull and shiny. In such a culture, the following passage presents the translator with a difficult challenge: “Come now, let us reason together, says the Lord: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool” (Isa 1:18). They have no word for scarlet, white, or red, and they have never seen snow. It is obvious that they can recognize colors but they do not think of them that way. Symbols are not always sufficient to communicate reality.<sup>20</sup>

Words have meaning in context. Concepts are encoded into the words of the speaker and then decoded by the respondent based on his understanding of those words. The worldview in which this coding takes place determines the meaning of the message received. For instance, when ministering in a Hindu context, the Christian witness must use caution in asking whether a hearer has been born again or would like eternal life. The Hindu sees eternal life as a negative reality that he will eventually overcome. The Hindu also believes that he has already been born

again many times and will be again.

Language is limited when communicating abstract concepts that are not values in the culture. Reciprocal cultures often lack a word for giving thanks. Some cultures have no word for forgiveness or borrowing. These ideas are very difficult to communicate without words in our coded shorthand systems called language. Daniel Shaw recounts the difficulties of communicating Christian truths such as the kingdom of God in a culture that had no word for or even the concept of king.<sup>21</sup>

While the most obvious first step to proclaiming the gospel in various cultures is learning languages, learning another language is extremely frustrating and difficult. There are almost 7,000 languages in the world today; many of these are main languages that constitute many subdivisions of dialects.<sup>22</sup> Many missionaries attend language school for one year, believe that they know the language, and should be able to communicate. This may be true at the objective level of shopping or asking directions; it is not yet true regarding deeper matters of worldview, belief systems, and values.

Unfortunately, it is impossible to move a thought that is in one mind directly into another's mind. A mutually held communication system must encode the thought and send it out as a message. The respondent then receives the message and decodes it, thereby giving it meaning. Sometimes the result is remarkably close to the intended message and this is successful communication. Other times, there is a disconnect due to noise or interference and the result is miscommunication. A message was indeed sent and received but the thought was not successfully transferred from one mind into another.

The process requires the encoding according to the rules of the communication system and then the system of another's understanding must decode the message to receive the meaning.<sup>23</sup>

### **Culturality**

Just as we recognize that there are personalities of various types, there are also cultural types that have their own peculiarities. Some cultural anthropologists and missiologists have devised scales consisting of core cultural values plotted on continua to measure strengths or values.<sup>24</sup> I refer to these cultural types and dynamics as *culturalities*. Each culture has its own way of viewing reality, or its own worldview, and has many characteristics that anthropologists can study and categorize that have become fields of study in their own right. For instance, ethnocognition refers to the study of the way a people view reality and process information, that is, how they think.<sup>25</sup>

Some cultures traffic well in abstract thought and linear, sequential logic and can argue ideas. Others tend to be more concrete in their approach to life. The communicator will find acceptance for presented ideas when he delivers them in culturally appropriate formats. Relational cultures measure truth primarily by the trustworthiness of the person who presents it. Additionally, the ability to receive information in one format and then transform it into another before giving it to someone else is a learned skill. In other words, people give what they receive in the format in which they received it. When we present truth in logical syllogisms or deductive reasoning as is common in the United States, our hearers can only follow along and embrace the conclusion if they are from cultures that process information

this way. However, we usually continue in the same style of teaching and preaching that we used in our home culture.

In 1958, William J. Lederer and Eugene Burdick published a book that became a national bestseller whose title gave the American people a new concept and term: the ugly American.<sup>26</sup> The book was a fictional account of true situations regarding America's foreign policy in Asia. In the book, the ineffective, bumbling American bureaucrats throw money at problems and refuse to learn the basic greetings, language, culture, or history of the countries where they live. Their Russian counterparts become experts in each of these areas and are extremely effective in their own foreign policy. The book describes the epitome of the American traveler who thinks every country should be and wants to be like the U.S.A. He lives by the rules of home and wants the nationals to adopt the U.S.A. standards when around him. This ethnocentrism lives on, of course, and leads us to judge the cultures of the world that are unlike our own as inferior.

Many times this is simply out of ignorance. A Kikuyu proverb says, "The man who has never traveled thinks his mother is the best cook." If we have nothing with which to compare our culture, we not only assume others are the same, but when we find out that they are not, they appear to us as backward, undeveloped, and usually morally wrong. This often happens when American Christians go to cultures that are very different from their own for the first time. The tendency is simply to teach and preach just as you did at home. When these methods are ineffective and even our best sermons are not bearing fruit, we return from the short-term trip proclaiming that they are a cold, closed, and hard-hearted people. Conversely,

if the trip happens to be among people whose culture is similar to our own and results in more fruit, we report that they are very open to the gospel and a harvest-field.

As a missionary, I have witnessed many frustrated attempts of short-term team members in missions ministry. When the missionary indicates some needed cultural adjustments, many respond, "I don't care about the culture; I just want to teach the Bible." The cultural adjustments seem to be overwhelming and sometimes workers feel inadequate to the task. A common defense mechanism comes into play that minimizes the cultural importance and argues that there is only one gospel. After all, it is the gospel once for all handed down to the saints, and there is only one meaning of Scripture. However, rather than dismissing the need for culturally appropriate ministry, this argument supports it. Since there is only one saving gospel, and this one way must be heard and understood, it is essential that we present it in a way that can be "heard." The Western, highly literate cultures are the minority in the world. To be effective witnesses, we must learn how others think, interact, and communicate.

### **Orality Issues**

Oral cultures constitute over fifty percent of the world's people, and over seventy percent of the unreached people groups of the world. Among these people, relationships are the key to successful communication. Oral cultures are those that learn best and most easily through stories, anecdotes, proverbs, songs, and practical experience. People in oral cultures are preliterate<sup>27</sup> and often speak a language that has not yet been reduced

to writing. In fact, the International Orality Network that grew out of Lausanne's Executive Task Force regarding issues in orality reports, "At least 1.5 billion people in the world have never been introduced to reading and writing."<sup>28</sup>

Of the almost 7,000 languages in the world, only 414 have a Bible translation, 1,068 have a New Testament, and others have some portions. Yet, over 3,000 languages do not have a single verse. It is obvious that much work remains in the task of Bible translation. A translator who feels called to enter a culture with an unwritten language to provide them the Scriptures must first learn the language without any teacher, book, or school. Then comes the long process of translation, teaching the people to read their own language, and revising the manuscript along the way. Wycliffe reports that the time needed for this process is twenty to thirty years, depending upon the language. No one suggests that the work among the 13,000 unreached people groups wait until they have a Bible finished for their language. We must utilize oral methodologies in order to communicate the gospel in culturally appropriate ways among such cultures.

However, oral methodologies are to work in concert with translation efforts and are meant to serve until a Bible is available and the target culture is trained to read, write, and value literacy. Oral methodologies are not to be permanent alternatives to Bible translation, but rather to work in conjunction with the written word when completed. Some Bible translators have said that their happiest day of ministry was when they finished the translation and gave the Bible to their people group; the saddest day was when they returned years later to find the Bibles

on a shelf unread. The day when a Bibleless language has God's word and loves to read it is decades away in most of these languages, if it happens at all. Some oral cultures never seem to embrace literacy or place a high value on it.

Herbert Klem has written an insightful book on orality in Africa<sup>29</sup> in which he presents the results of many literacy efforts that were less than desired. Most literacy efforts spring from our ethnocentric perspective that everyone wants to read and write because we value it in our culture. We often seek to address the felt needs that we would experience if we were in the target culture context. He found that for various reasons many cultures would not embrace literacy. Sometimes this was because their orality bound the culture together and in other cases, it was due to the shame that the elders felt when the children could read and they could not, so they denigrated the skill.<sup>30</sup> In addition to the oral cultures and their relational societies, countries such as the United States are experiencing a burgeoning secondary orality among their own populations.<sup>31</sup> Secondary orality refers to those who can read when necessary but whose preferences and thought patterns follow an oral pattern.<sup>32</sup>

### **Missiological Strategy and Methodology**

The key for successful ministry in another culture is to understand the culture at the worldview level. Only then, will we avoid the pitfalls of ethnocentrism and the monocultural methodologies of the ugly American. We must be sensitive to cultural differences for receiving and processing information. For instance, in an oral, relational culture a narrative format is the most effective communica-

tion method.

In highly literate cultures, a professor may assign chapters to read and reflect upon for class discussion, but in relational-type cultures, a narrative approach finds more success. Oral societies utilize a narrative approach for sharing information and training such as mentoring, master-apprentice, and watch-then-do models. Even in highly literate societies it is common to ask someone “how to” do rather than reading a manual explaining “how to,” even though every bookstore has a “how to” shelf in its inventory. The practice of a young man apprenticing himself to an established pastor or physician was the training school of former generations. Our own culture has largely forgotten these models but they still reign as the gold standard in others. We should remember and employ these effective models when training believers from oral cultures.

Understanding that cultures are as unique as the peoples that embrace them has led the discipline of intercultural communication to re-examine how we evangelize and disciple. A methodology that Jesus regularly used was telling stories. Stories capture the heart and engage our minds. When Nathan wanted to confront David with his sin, he couched it in the context of a story. The story had its desired effect. Others have written on the biblical basis of storying as a methodology by citing the many biblical examples.<sup>33</sup> In fact, even in highly literate cultures, the part of a sermon we remember most vividly, and often for years, is the story or illustration rather than the outline or main points. Many pastors cannot even remember their own outline from a previous week. The ability to recall is what renders story-telling so powerful.

Worldview, beliefs, values, and behavior patterns are at work in every person. Beliefs, values, and behavior patterns grow out of the worldview. Worldview is the lens through which we see the world regarding what is real, where we came from, where we are going, etc. This worldview grew out of the stories we heard all of our lives. If we believe that humans came from the union of two jungle animals, we will have great reverence for those animals and little regard for some cosmic god. When we replace these stories with biblical stories, a biblical worldview begins to take shape.

Missionaries have found that preaching John 3:16 on the first day in a village when the people had no background or worldview for understanding all of the implications of the verse was ineffective. However, when sharing the stories of the Bible from creation, the fall, the flood, and so forth to the cross, the people were broken-hearted for sin and repentant. They embraced Christ as the Savior that He is.<sup>34</sup>

This lack of a biblical worldview influences the acceptance of the gospel message in cultures like the United States as well. George Barna reported in 2004 that only seven percent of the U.S. population, nine percent of U.S. Protestants, and fifty-one percent of U.S. Protestant pastors had a biblical worldview.<sup>35</sup> One of my students had been witnessing to his mother unsuccessfully for thirteen years. He accepted the challenge of using this model for sharing the gospel with her on a weekly basis over lunch. Through the process of using the Chronological Bible Storying model, his mother has accepted Christ and been baptized.

Strategically, storying is an effective missiological method for several rea-

sons. With storying, people are able to understand, remember, and repeat the stories that they have heard. Oral culture peoples do not easily understand highly literate methods like steps and outlines, and even if they understand somewhat, they cannot remember and repeat them to others. Missionaries use storying effectively to disciple as well as evangelize. In one pastoral training model in Northern Africa, teachers taught local pastors in three levels fifty stories each and several songs or choruses that went with each story. At the end of three years, the pastors could evangelize, disciple, and train leaders armed with a corpus of 150 Bible stories, and four hundred fifty songs and choruses. In oral cultures, this method is much more effective than reading and reflecting—especially when the language has not yet been reduced to writing!

For Southern Baptists, over seventy-five percent of our churches are located in the twenty percent of the world that is highly literate.<sup>36</sup> Someone has said that a definition of insanity is continuing to do what you have always done while expecting different results. If we desire to see missions advance and the extension of the kingdom, we must learn to reach and teach cultures that are unlike our own. Learning the language of others is an essential first step, yet that in itself does not ensure effective communication. Each culture has its own nuances that render its culturality unique.

For example, churches in the United States that desire to have an outreach to Hispanics would do well to keep this dynamic in mind. While their efforts are well intentioned, cultures from the twenty-one countries that speak Spanish are as different as the cultures in the countries that speak English.<sup>37</sup> A success-

ful outreach should include opportunities to study the Bible in the “heart” or natal culture and language. The church with a vision for reaching Hispanics should consider steps like Sunday School classes for various culture groups such as Mexicans, Cubans, Ecuadorians, etc., and then a combined worship service to celebrate the unity that we have in Christ. In this way, the individual is evangelized or disciplined in a way that is culturally appropriate but challenged to take the next step of unity.

### **Conclusion**

Intercultural communication is just one tool from the multifaceted field of intercultural studies. With the use of these tools from the cultural anthropology toolbox, Christian communicators discover more effective ways to share the gospel.

Studying the various cultures of the world to know how best to communicate the gospel is wise stewardship. Night is coming when no man can work and there remains very much land to possess. Preaching to people in a language that they do not understand, or using any other culturally inappropriate method, would obviously be an ineffective strategy. As those who have been entrusted with the gospel once for all delivered to the saints, without which no one can be saved, we should use every resource available to us for effective sharing of this saving message.

The indigenous people that killed Jim Elliot, Nate Saint, Pete Fleming, Roger Youderian, and Ed McCulley in the Ecuadorian jungle in 1956 were once known as Aucas. This word comes from the neighboring Quichua Indians and means “naked savages.” No one had gotten close enough to learn their real tribal name and survive the encounter. After the tragic

deaths of these men, Nate Saint's sister, Rachel, and Jim Elliot's widow, Elisabeth, were able to reach and teach this ruthless tribe by using many of the skills described above. We now know that the tribe calls itself Waodani. Their idiomatic way of referring to something that they like very much is to say that they "see" it well, or of hearing great news as something that they "hear" very well. When we think of other cultures around God's world, how will they hear the gospel?

#### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>All quotations from Scripture come from the English Standard Version (ESV).

<sup>2</sup>*Missions Frontiers*, January-February 2005, 4.

<sup>3</sup>An Unreached People Group (UPG) is one in which there are less than two percent Evangelical Christians. Sociologists report that a population of at least two percent can influence the rest of the culture over time. A population of less than two percent evangelicals cannot evangelize the remaining population without some outside help. While many of the UPGs do not have a single Christian, others may have a handful or even a small church.

<sup>4</sup>See "Interesting Facts about 'Coca-Cola,'" [cited 29 Sep 2005]. Online: [http://www.coca-cola.com.au/about\\_facts.asp](http://www.coca-cola.com.au/about_facts.asp).

<sup>5</sup>"For who even of slight intelligence does not understand that as nurses commonly do with infants, God is wont in a measure to 'lisp' in speaking to us? Thus, such forms of speaking do not so much express clearly what God is like as accommodate the knowledge of him to our slight capacity. To do this he must descend far beneath his loftiness." John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (2 vols., trans. John T. McNeill; Philadel-

phia: Westminster, 1960), I:13:1.

<sup>6</sup>Orality is a phenomenon in every culture to one degree or another. The International Orality Network is an organization that developed out of the Executive Task Force on Orality formed by the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization 2004 meeting in Pattaya, Thailand to research and educate. Because at least sixty-seven percent of the world's people are either non-literate or functionally illiterate, and most of the unreached are in this category, new and effective strategies are being sought for reaching them with the gospel.

<sup>7</sup>Joseph Kosuth was the artist. His area of expertise is conceptual art where he presents the objects and representations together as a form of "metalanguage." For instance, an exhibit would be a white rock or a white wall. The descriptor and the object are the same word.

<sup>8</sup>While there are definitions of contextualization that fill entire textbooks, there are few succinct definitions as accurate as SIM's (Serving in Mission International). It is as follows: we define contextualization as "meaningful and appropriate cross-cultural transmission of Biblical truth which is faithful to its original intent and sensitive to culture." See "Contextualization: SIM Position Paper," [cited 29 Sep 2005]. Online: <http://africamissions.org/africa/contxSIM.html>.

<sup>9</sup>Protestant missionaries began working among Highland Quichuas in 1902 with little fruit. In fact, after fifty years of working among the Highland Quichuas of Chimborazo province in central Ecuador, Gospel Missionary Union missionary, Julia Woodward Anderson, could count on one hand the number of converts she had seen. That was 1953,

and it would be two more years before the first baptism among them would occur. See John Maust, *New Song in the Andes* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1992).

<sup>10</sup>Michael D. Sills, "A Comparative Study of the Three Major Religious Movements of the Highland Quichua in Andean Ecuador from the Inca Conquest to the Present" (D.Miss. diss.; Reformed Theological Seminary, 1997); idem, "Highland Quichuas: Discovering a Culturally Appropriate Pastoral Training Model" (Ph.D. diss.; Reformed Theological Seminary, 2001).

<sup>11</sup>These findings are based on the research of Nil Ripken (an alias for security reasons) and the funding from his mission agency that allowed him to conduct research for four years beginning in 2000. His goal was to investigate and discover the actual number of those who died for the faith in Middle Eastern and other oppressive cultures known to be hostile to Christians.

<sup>12</sup>Albert Mehrabian reports that ninety-three percent of meaning in a conversation is conveyed nonverbally (fifty-five percent via facial expressions, thirty-eight percent via paralanguage, seven percent via words). Research findings cited in Carley H. Dodd, *Dynamics of Intercultural Communication* (5<sup>th</sup> ed.; New York: McGraw-Hill, 1998), 148, 149.

<sup>13</sup>Tony Horwitz recounts in his book on Captain Cook's voyages and encounters with various Pacific island cultures that there were relaxed sexual standards. Horwitz cites the work of anthropologist, Marshall Sahlins: "Marshall Sahlins

calls the Hawaiian culture 'Aphrodisian,' and cites as evidence a nineteenth-century missionary who complained that islanders practiced twenty forms of intercourse—and had as many words for coitus. 'If any one term were selected to translate the Seventh Commandment,' Sahlins writes, 'it was bound to leave the impression that the other nineteen activities were still permitted' (Tony Horwitz, *Blue Latitudes: Boldly Going Where Captain Cook Has Gone Before* [New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2002], 392).

<sup>14</sup>Eugene A. Nida, *Message and Mission: The Communication of the Christian Faith* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1960), 37-55. The plural here is intentional because there were many biblical cultures in which the Scriptures were written, over 1,500 years, by many human authors under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and in three languages.

<sup>15</sup>Well-known examples in English to Spanish translation are the English, "you're pulling my leg" which must be communicated in Spanish with an idiom that literally translates, "you're taking my hair." To communicate that someone is an honest, plain speaker who will say whatever comes to mind translates in Spanish, as "he doesn't have any hair on his tongue."

<sup>16</sup>Donald K. Smith, *Creating Understanding: A Handbook for Christian Communication across Cultural Landscapes* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992).

<sup>17</sup>The twelve-signal systems according to Smith are verbal for speech; written symbols for representing

speech; numeric and number systems; pictorial for two-dimensional representations; artifactual for three-dimensional representations and objects; audio for use of nonverbal sounds and silence; kinesic for body motions, facial expressions, and posture; optical for light and color; tactile for touch and the sense of feel; spatial for the utilization of space; temporal for the utilization of time; and olfactory for taste and smell.

<sup>18</sup>One misguided cultural anthropologist suggested that it would be appropriate in a culture where the pig was the only known mammal to translate the phrase, "Lamb of God" as "Pig of God." Of course, this would cause other problems in the Scriptures when explaining what the unclean animal was in Judaism. The "quick solution" would cause more problems later. An excellent detailed explanation of these dynamics can be found in "Contextualization: SIM Position Paper" (see note 8).

<sup>19</sup>A proverb in Spanish says that a person who speaks two languages has two souls. As with many proverbs, this should not be understood literally. It simply means that an idea can be expressed more easily in one language than in another.

<sup>20</sup>This had led to some controversial theories called linguistic determinism and linguistic relativism. Benjamin Whorf and Edward Sapir have studied the connection between a culture's language and their ways of thinking and viewing reality. Whorf wrote in 1956 proposing a theory entitled *linguistic relativity*,



which declares that language tends to shape reality for cultures. That is, it guides our thinking and the ways we view reality. A more controversial theory is *linguistic determinism*, an extension of the first theory; this believes language actually determines the ability to think. See Benjamin Whorf, *Language, Thought and Reality: Selected Writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1956); idem, *Collected Papers on Metalinguistics* (Washington, DC: US Department of State, Foreign Service Institute); Edward Sapir, *Language: An Introduction to the Study of Speech* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1921); idem, "Conceptual Categories in Primitive Languages," in *Language in Culture and Society: A Reader in Linguistics and Anthropology* (ed. D. Hymes; New York: Harper and Row, 1964).

<sup>21</sup>R. Daniel Shaw and Charles Van Engen, *Communicating God's Word in a Complex World: God's Truth or Hocus-pocus?* (New York: Roman and Littlefield, 2003), 11. Shaw goes on to explain his difficulty when he was translating among the Samo people. He was forced to translate John 3:16 among a people who had no words for love, world, or believe (cf. 177).

<sup>22</sup>Of the known major languages of the world, Wycliffe Bible Translators reports in August 2005 that 414 have a whole Bible, 1,068 have a New Testament, 873 have at least one book of the Bible, and 1,376 have some work in progress.

<sup>23</sup>David J. Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally: An Introduction to Missionary Communication*

(2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 40, 41. See also, Shaw and Van Engen, *Communicating God's Word in a Complex World*, 31.

<sup>24</sup>Gert Jan Hofstede, Opaal B. Pedersen, and Geert Hofstede, *Exploring Culture: Exercises, Stories, and Synthetic Cultures* (Yarmouth, Maine: Intercultural Press, 2002); Sarah A. Lanier, *Foreign to Familiar: A Guide to Understanding Hot- and Cold-climate Cultures* (Hagerstown, MD: MacDougal Publishing, 2000). Sherwood Lingenfelter and Marvin K. Mayers, *Ministering Cross-culturally* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2003).

<sup>25</sup>Diane Vaughan, *The Challenger Launch Decision: Risky Technology, Culture, and Deviance at NASA* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997).

<sup>26</sup>William J. Lederer and Eugene Burdick, *The Ugly American* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1958).

<sup>27</sup>Although some culture researchers use the terms "preliterate" and "illiterate" synonymously, and others prefer the former only to avoid the pejorative connotation of the latter, there is a technical difference. "Preliterate" refers to those who live in cultural contexts that have never had the opportunity to learn literacy, perhaps due to their oral language not having been reduced to writing. "Illiterate" refers more accurately to those in literate cultures who have not learned to read or write by choice or class situation.

<sup>28</sup>Unpublished memo, International Orality Network, author's personal file:

FAST FACTS On Orality, Literacy and Chronological Bible Storying:

- At least 1.5 billion people in the world have never been introduced to reading and writing.
- At least 67 percent of the world's people are either non-literate or functionally illiterate.
- Historically, SBC, IMB growth predominates among those who are semi-literate to literate.
- From 75 percent to 85 percent of Islamic women are oral communicators (non-literate to functionally illiterate).
- At least 65 percent of Islamic men are oral communicators.
- Significant numbers of Islamic Koranic leaders in the Middle East and Africa are oral communicators, operating by means of a memorized Koran.
- Illiteracy is dominant among animistic peoples.
- For perspective sake, 48-51 percent of adult Americans are non-literate or functionally illiterate.
- Oral communicators understand, learn, and assimilate information best when it comes to them by means of narrative or storying formats.
- Conversely, oral communicators find it difficult to understand, and next to impossible to remember, recall and reproduce expositional outlines, points, principles, and steps.
- Strategic directions with a focus on the unreached thrusts us among peoples and people groups who are predominately oral communicators.

<sup>29</sup>Herbert V. Klem, *Oral Communication of the Scripture: Insights from African Oral Art* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1982).

<sup>30</sup>Ibid.

<sup>31</sup>A. Steve Evans, *Communicating Christ in a Cross-Cultural Context: Developing Effective Media and Communication Strategies Leading to*

*Church Planting Movements* (Communication and Mobilization Strategies Team, IMB, South Asia Region, 2004).

<sup>32</sup>Some would argue that the U.S.A. is becoming visual as well as oral owing to the popularity of the internet images and instant messaging services. This hybrid oral-visual culture is at least not as highly literate as it once was.

<sup>33</sup>James Slack, "Biblical Foundations for Chronological Bible Storying" (International Mission Board document).

<sup>34</sup>One of the most well known examples of the use of Chronological Bible Storying is the video, *Eetaow*, produced by New Tribes Missions, which documents the successful reaching and teaching of the oral Mouk people in Papua New Guinea by NTM missionary Mark Zook and his family.

<sup>35</sup>"Based on interviews with 601 Senior Pastors nationwide, representing a random cross-section of Protestant churches, Barna reports that only half of the country's Protestant pastors (51%) have a biblical worldview. Defining such a worldview as believing that absolute moral truth exists, that it is based upon the Bible, and having a biblical view on six core beliefs (the accuracy of biblical teaching, the sinless nature of Jesus, the literal existence of Satan, the omnipotence and omniscience of God, salvation by grace alone, and the personal responsibility to evangelize), the researcher produced data showing that there are significant variations by denominational affiliation and

other demographics" (see the Barna Update: "Only Half Of Protestant Pastors Have A Biblical Worldview," 12 January 2004, [cited 13 Dec 05]. Online: <http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdate&BarnaUpdateID=156>).

<sup>36</sup>James Slack, "A Description of Chronological Bible Storying with Missiological Considerations" (International Mission Board document). "Chronological Bible Storying (CBS) is a method of presentation that tells selected biblical stories in chronological order in the power of the Holy Spirit so as to bring people to genuine faith in Christ, mature discipleship, and fruitful Christian service. Ordinarily CBS includes a time of dialog after the story. In the dialog the storyteller uses questions to guide listeners to discover the meaning and significance of the biblical story. The formulation of this method has been relatively recent, but the basic elements of the method are ancient."

<sup>37</sup>The word for "now" in some Spanish-speaking countries is *ahora* and the word for "this very moment!" is *ahorita*. In many other Spanish countries, it is the exact opposite.