

Cross-Cultural And Multicultural Ministry In The New Testament

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Although it was not so designated the synod's first notable cross-cultural mission effort was the work among the Apaches of Arizona. There have been many such efforts since then, and not only in what we today call "world mission fields." There are many reasons why the topic of cross-cultural and multi-cultural ministry is timely. There are ever more immigrants entering the United States. The proportion of Hispanic people in the general population increases rapidly. The celebration and encouragement of cultural diversity has replaced the American melting pot ideal. Without much reflection or research one can think of ministries carried on—in or by our synod—involving Native Americans, Hmong, Hispanics, African-Americans, and Koreans.

The assigned topic is timeless as well as timely, because it looks to the timeless Word of God for its material. As we shall see the mandate, the motivation, and the message for cross-cultural and multi-cultural ministry are there in the New Testament; they are not dated or alterable. There is also much information in the New Testament regarding the manpower through which various cross-cultural ministries were carried out. We also learn about the mindset and the methods of those who undertook the work.

"Culture" is a broad term. An obsolete and rare use of the word reminds us of its root: "worship, reverential homage." The word derives from the Latin cultus, worship or religion. It reminds us that a people's culture reflects their religion. The Oxford English Dictionary defines it as "the training, development, and refinement of mind, tastes, manner;...the intellectual side of civilization." It does not relate directly to skin color, shape of eyes or nose, or hairy texture.

Jesus and his apostles were Jews, living in the Roman Empire, which was heir to the Hellenistic (Greek) culture. Hellenists loved wisdom, rational inquiry, historical investigation. They asked the Greek questions. "Why?" and "How:" Many had departed from their ancestors' worship of many gods, but even the most enlightened practiced various forms of superstition. The best and brightest are included in Paul's description of spiritual and moral bankruptcy at Romans 1:18-32.

A common language and culture, law and order, relative ease of travel and communications—all were factors favorable to the gospel's spread in the first generation and first centuries of the church's existence. The over-arching Greek—or Greco-Roman—culture included many sub-cultures. Roman policy encouraged the preservation among true "client states" (conquered peoples) of ethnic customs, laws, and religions.

In the pages of the New Testament we meet or hear of Samaritans, pagans with many gods, philosophers of various schools, barbarians, Scythians, and an Ethiopian eunuch. There were citizens, free men, and slaves; officials, governors, and soldiers. There were also "God-fearing Gentiles," people of non-Jewish ancestry who in some degree had converted to Judaism.

Among the Jews there were those who feared God and those who were Jews in name only. There were Pharisees, Saducees, Zealots, and Essenes. The last are never mentioned in the New Testament, probably because in their self-chosen isolation they never came into contact with Jesus and his disciples. There were Palestinian Jews living in Judea and Galilee, and Jews of the Dispersion who had been scattered all over the Roman Empire and beyond. After Pentecost, there were Christians from all of the above-mentioned Jewish and, Gentile groups.

The strongest, most frequently noted, most stubborn cultural difference we meet in the New Testament is that between Jew and Gentile. From the time of Moses to the time of Christ there was a divinely ordained barrier between the people of Israel and "the nations," The Jews were God's chosen people, living under God's Law, entrusted with God's promises, set apart for God's service, blessed to be a blessing. The Law which separated Israel from the Gentiles served its purpose "until Christ came" (Gal 3: 24. NIV footnote). By his saving work Christ "destroyed the barrier: the dividing wall of hostility" (Eph 2: 14) In Christ, Jew and Gentile

were to become a "third race": "His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two" (Eph 2:15). The difference between Jew and Gentile, however, is never entirely forgotten in the New Testament. While it no longer existed in God's sight, it continued to present problems in the life of the church.

Finally, after Pentecost, there were Christians from all of these groups. There were weak and strong, rich and poor, Jews and Gentiles, slave and free. There are evidences in virtually every book of the New Testament of cross-cultural and multi-cultural ministry. It is clear from Jesus' last words to his disciples that this was in accord with his will and promise. We consider first

The Mandate

We call it the Great Commission; "Make disciples of all nations" Mt 28: 18-20). Gather people who trust me for their salvation, learn from me, follow me. A tiny group from a tiny land was to take on the responsibility of proclaiming Jesus and his work throughout the Mediterranean and beyond. What the Old Testament foretold God has brought about: "Repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations" (Lk 24:46f). "All nations," he said, "all the world," "to all creation." That was a startling thing for those Jews to hear. It would be a difficult thing for them to learn. They would, in time, learn and do it.

That which is to continue "to the very end of the age" must include disciples who were not with Jesus during those forty days between his resurrection and his ascension, who are not contemporary with the apostles. The mandate is still in effect, directed to all disciples of Jesus in every generation. It is not debatable. It is our assignment as Christians. By his authority and with the promise of his presence, we citizens of heaven are on this earth to reach across cultural barriers and boundaries with the good news of God's forgiveness in Christ Jesus.

The Motivation

In time and according to circumstances the disciples organized for the work of preaching the gospel. Whatever committees there were and whatever programs they devised and administered would have been much ado about nothing if the Spirit of Christ had not motivated and empowered them. "He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God....When they met together, they asked him, 'Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?' He said to them: 'It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth'" (Ac 1:3,6-8).

That is the kingdom of God. It is not a place but an activity. It is God's rule of grace in human hearts. It is established by testimony about Christ, his saving work, his accomplished salvation. Those who witnessed his gracious power in action would bear witness to what they had seen and heard and learned. In ever-widening circles this kingdom of grace would extend "to the ends of the earth." Not with an imperative but with a promise Jesus motivated them: "You will be [future of certainty, of promise] my witnesses." Ten days later, on Pentecost, the promised Spirit was poured out on them in spectacular manner. Motivated and, empowered, they began the work of making disciples.

The greatest practitioner of cross-cultural and multi-cultural ministry was not present to hear Jesus' mission mandate and promises. He was a fanatical enemy of Christ and his church. Furious misguided religious zeal in person, that was Saul of Tarsus. On his way to Damascus to arrest Christians he himself was arrested (Ac 9:3-6). The One who had been executed as a criminal in the manner reserved for the lowest criminal had triumphed over death. God had exalted Jesus of Nazareth and Saul could no longer deny it. To fearful and reluctant Ananias the Lord said, "(Saul) is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel" (Ac 9:15).

That was grace, the unmerited and unconditional favor of God. Grace is what Saul of Tarsus—the Apostle Paul—called it all his days, never forgetting what God called him to be. The word appears about 125 times in the New Testament and more than 100 times it is Paul who uses it.

Grace is not our decision for Christ but his decision to rescue us by living a perfect life in our place and dying as the perfect sacrifice for our sins. Grace is not our commitment to him but his commitment to the way of the cross. Not, "I found it," but he found us when we were not looking for him, when we didn't want to be found, when we didn't even necessarily realize we were lost. Like Paul, we also know that our calling as public ministers of the church is a gift of his grace, not our gift to him.

We have unfinished business. We do not have an eternity in which to finish it. Jesus speaks of an end to this age. We do not know the day and the hour of his coming again, but we know that we are on earth to use our days and hours to bring the gospel to "every tribe and language and people and nation" (Rev 5:9). The Lord has included us among...

The Manpower

The Savior committed the apostleship to men of varying backgrounds and abilities. Peter and John were leaders, part of the inner circle of the Twelve. Yet, they were regarded as "unschooled, ordinary men" (Acts 4:13). They had the best of teachers, of course; for three years they learned practical theology from Jesus. They saw all that Jesus did and heard all that he taught. They received power from the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. We speak of manpower, but in these men there was a special "God-power" which equipped them for their great assignment.

On the day of Pentecost "all of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the spirit enabled them..." (Ac 2:4). It was coherent and intelligible speaking in the various languages of three continents. One very important (essential?) tool for cross-cultural ministry had been miraculously provided. "Language is culture," it has been said, and this reversal of Babel still occurs when faithful Christians do the hard work of learning new languages in order to declare God's salvation to those of another language and culture.

The Apostle to the Gentiles preached to Jews as well, but he was the specially chosen and specially gifted ambassador to the nations. He was the multi-cultural missionary and pastor without equal. What a remarkably equipped man he was! As a biblical scholar he had been the pupil of the great Rabbi Gamaliel. He was, by his own description, a sort of "super-Jew" (Php 3:4-6). He was also a master of the Greek language and of Greek rhetoric, well acquainted with Greek literature and philosophy. He was a Roman citizen who knew what his rights were. His hometown, Tarsus, was "no mean city," the site of a renowned university. With a broad-based education, at home in two worlds, this world-citizen knew God's Word and he knew the people to whom he was to bring God's Word. He understood and grieved over his own people's apostasy. He understood and deplored the godlessness and immorality of the Gentile world. Combining what he had observed with Spirit-given insight, he described the people of every culture in Romans 1:18-32—and much of his description sounds very modern.

The education and training for the public ministry which we strive to provide in our synod's preparatory schools, college, and seminary is not essentially different from the preparation which God in his wisdom provided for Paul. The study of Scripture, of ancient and modern cultures, of human nature at its best and at its worst, equips men and women for a lifetime of learning. It equips them with the ability to understand what is familiar and a willingness to become familiar with what is alien. All of this, of course, would be useless without faith in Christ and love for all whom he has redeemed. And that brings us to a consideration of what we can learn from the New Testament about the mindset of those who first carried on crosscultural gospel work.

The Mindset

The Bible knows nothing of "happy heathen" who live a carefree life and should be left alone. It does not know of religious people who please God by "following the light that is in them." It knows only of human beings who are in darkness until the gospel light shines on them, who are Satan's slaves until the good news about Jesus sets them free to serve God. Gentiles in their lawlessness and Jews who imagined they were keeping God's law were all sinners in need of a Savior. There are "decent" people who seem to live decent lives without Christ, but they still need him and he still says, "Make disciples of them." The people of other races and tongues may be content the way they are, but they will be miserable for eternity without Christ. He still says, "Make disciples of them." God prepared his salvation in the sight of all people, even the kind of heathen you and I were when we were born and before we were baptized.

Although Jesus' ministry was limited to Palestine and his first mission was to his own people, the Gospels provide many examples of his loving attitude and actions toward non-Jews—often while he was traveling or "on vacation." There was the Samaritan woman at the well of Sychar: from a despised race, belonging to a sect which had corrupted God's Old Testament message, an outcast because of her adulterous life. Jesus offered her the water of life. "Many Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony" (Jn 4:5-42).

Jesus healed a demon-possessed man in the region of the Gerasenes, pagan people who raised pigs (Lk 8:26-39). At Capernaum he commended the faith of the Gentile centurion whose servant he had healed (Lk 7:1-9; Mt 8:5-13). "Many will come from the east and the west," he said, "and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven" (Mt 8:11).

Near Tyre he was approached by a Greek woman who was born in Syrian Phoenicia. She pleaded with him to heal her daughter, would not be put off by what seemed an unanswerable and insulting rebuff, gained her desire, and was commended for her great faith (Mk 7:24-30; Mt 15:21-28).

East of the Jordan River, in the region of the Decapolis, the people begged Jesus to place his hand on a man who was deaf and could hardly talk. The region was a center of Hellenistic culture, not of Jewish faith and piety. Jesus healed the man, making clear that his grace is for people of all nations (Mk 7:31-36).

Ten men from the unclean and outcast sub-culture of lepers approached him and were healed. One of them was also from the hated Samaritan race and sect. Jesus healed him (Lk 17:19).

Tax collectors were a despised sub-culture within the nation of Israel. The man in Jesus' parable, with his confession of sin and his plea for God's mercy, was not typical. There was nothing inherently good or lovable about them. As agents of the Roman government they were despised as traitors who worked for the hated foreign oppressor. They were notorious for their overcharging. The tradition of the rabbis taught that if a thief entered your house, only the things he touched were ceremonially unclean. But if a tax collector entered your house the house itself and everything in it was unclean. Beggars would not accept alms from them. You would not want your daughter to marry one. Jesus invited a tax collector, Levi Matthew, to be one of the Twelve (Lk 5:27-32; Mt 9:9-13).

There was another representative of that sub-culture of cheats and chiselers, Zacchaeus by name (Lk 19:1-10). As a chief tax collector Zacchaeus would be regarded as a boss scoundrel and a leader of traitors. If it is more difficult for a rich man to enter the kingdom than for a camel to pass through the needle's eye, what about a rich rascal? Zacchaeus acknowledged, too, that society's estimate of him was not just unthinking prejudice: "If I have cheated anybody out of anything...." There really was no "if" about it.

What did Jesus say to this man? "I must stay at your house today." "I must" meant that this was something the Father had given him to do. It was part of God's saving plan. Inviting himself to "stay" at Zacchaeus's house was to invite himself to a meal. In inviting himself Jesus was already speaking a word of forgiveness. He was not condoning Zacchaeus's way of life. He was not excusing him on the ground that times were hard, not rationalizing Zacchaeus's sinful ways as the fault of the little man's upbringing. No, he was forgiving: "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost." The tax collector was not saved by his enthusiasm for Jesus or his readiness to make restitution, but because Jesus found and rescued a lost man.

"The people" generally, not only the Pharisees, wondered how a religious teacher could eat with an irreligious man. How could Israel's Messiah, if that's what he was, be so indiscriminating? Their attitude was evidence that they had not begun to understand Jesus or appreciate their own need for him. If ever we are inclined to regard people of other cultures and sub-cultures as greater sinners than ourselves, let us recognize that sin is sin and that we too have come short of God's favorable estimate. We would not be here or anywhere in his church if he had not taken the initiative to choose us, live and die for us, call us, and preserve us in the faith.

When he had completed his work the risen Christ opened the minds of his disciples so they could understand the Scriptures, including the prophecies that "repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations" (Lk 24:47). Peter seemed to have understood the significance of Jesus' ministry to people of other cultures and the meaning of the Great Commission when he preached on Pentecost: "The promise is to...all whom the Lord our God will call" (Ac 2:39). If Paul was ever in doubt about the, universality of Christ's work and of the mandate to preach the good news, it is never reported in Acts or evidenced in his letters. "I am obligated both to Greeks and non-Greeks, both to the wise and the foolish" (Ro 1:14). "Is God the God of the Jews only? Is he not the God of the Gentiles too? Yes, of Gentiles too" (Ro 3:29).

Even Peter, however, needed further instruction regarding God's plan for the nations, for non-Jews. "At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius a centurion in what was known as the Italian Regiment. He and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly" (Acts 10:1,2). This army officer and his family were Gentiles by birth and upbringing, but they were also proselytes (converts) of the gate. That is, they believed in the Lord God of Israel and their moral outlook was that of the Ten Commandments rather than of the prevailing pagan culture. Only, the men had not become full converts to Judaism by submitting to circumcision. You know the rest of the story (Ac 10:1-11:18).

Those who had received the gift of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost were Jews. Those who had received the Holy Spirit in Joppa were Jews. The six circumcised Christians who came with Peter from Joppa were astonished that now Gentiles were receiving the Holy Spirit. That meant that Gentiles did not have to become Jews first by the rite of circumcision, did not have to submit to all the other legal requirements of Moses's code before they could be part of the fellowship of believers in Jesus the Messiah.

There was joy among the angels of heaven but not among all Jewish Christians: "The apostles and the brothers throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him and said, 'You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them'" (Ac 11:1-3). In their criticism of Peter they did not speak of the fact that Cornelius and the others had heard God's Word and believed it, that they had received the Holy Spirit and been baptized. They concentrated instead on Peter's "unlawful" contact with those Gentiles. They noted that he had received Gentile guests at the house of Simon the Tanner. He had also been a guest of Cornelius in that Gentile centurion's house. Both actions—extending hospitality and accepting hospitality—violated the ceremonial code. These critics were not convinced that Gentiles could be part of God's family without first becoming Jews. Peter set them straight on that occasion (Ac 11:4-17) and "when they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, 'So then, God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life'" (Ac 11:18).

Old attitudes die hard, however. Thirteen or fourteen years, after Jesus' Great Commission and the miracle of Pentecost, the church was still concentrating on missions to Jews: "Now those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, telling the message only to Jews" (Ac 11:19).

What was the reason for that? It was not a language barrier, because nearly everyone spoke Greek. Was it prejudice? Ignorance? Had they forgotten Jesus' mandate? Had they lost motivation? Did they imagine that God had some other way of saving the pagans, or that he does not care what happens to the heathen? Was there a strategic reason, such as a decision to build a strong base and network of Jewish believers first? Whatever their reasons, we ought to ask ourselves whether there is even a good reason for Christians to neglect the sharing of the good news with every kind of people. What good reason can there ever be for just letting people go to hell? As long as there are human beings who are under the judgment of God because of their sins, who

have not heard the message of forgiveness, can we ever relax and say; "Now we have reached out enough, witnessed enough, prayed enough, done all that the Lord intends for us to do"?

Some of the Jewish believers in Christ did not think so. Some Hellenistic Jewish Christians told the good news to pagan Greeks. They recognized that the church does not witness only to a certain kind—"our kind"—of people. The Lord blessed that work and there were many converts (Ac 11:20f).

When mistaken attitudes are not challenged or changed they can harden into teachings that undercut the gospel: "Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: 'Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved'" (Ac 15:1). God's object lesson in the case of Centurion Cornelius was forgotten or discounted. Like Paul, these "Judaizers" had been trained in strict adherence to all the details of the Law of Moses and to the traditions which had been gathered around it. Like Paul, they believed that Jesus is Israel's Messiah and the world's Savior. Unlike Paul, they did not understand that the Law of Moses was only temporary—serving its purpose until Christ came, and then no longer in force. Unlike Paul, they believed that Gentile Christians must become full-fledged Jews in order to be saved. "This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question (Ac 5:2). What, followed was the Council at Jerusalem.

God had revealed his will concerning the issue of how Gentiles were to come into the church. God settled the church's policy for all time by giving the Gentiles the Holy Spirit. Cornelius and the others had not fulfilled and were not required to fulfill any requirements of the Law. What did that prove? It proved that Gentiles need not become Jews before they could be saved. "No!" said Peter, "We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are" (Ac 15:11). Paul, a key figure in the council, could later recall what happened at Jerusalem: "blot even Titus, who was with me, way: compelled to be circumcised, even though he was a Greek" (Ga 2:3). The principle was reviewed and reaffirmed that salvation is by grace through faith, not by a lifestyle which conforms to any law system—even the Law given by God himself through Moses.

There was, nevertheless, a difference between Jews and Gentiles in sexual attitudes and standards of sexual conduct. Not at Jerusalem, but almost everywhere else, there would also be questions of diet: eating any meat, eating meat offered to idols, eating meat from an unclean animal or from an animal that had been strangled or from which the blood had not been drained. At the conclusion of the meeting at Jerusalem James said. "It is my judgment...that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood" (Ac 15:19).

The letter was delivered in person, by "Judas (called Barsabbas) and Silas, two men who were leaders among the brothers" (Ac 15:22), in the company of Paul and Barnabas. The letter itself was not impersonal, but the personal delivery by two Jerusalem believers made it more personal. The message attached no ifs, ands, or buts to the gospel of salvation through faith alone. It allowed no obstacle to full-fledged fellowship between Gentile and Jewish Christians. Rather, it encouraged the Gentiles to avoid things that would make it difficult for Jewish believers to share a meal with them or to express fellowship with them in other ways.

There had been evidence of cross-cultural tensions on other than doctrinal grounds, too. Even in the mother church at Jerusalem there was a problem between two sub-cultures of Jewish Christians which had nothing to do with the basic teachings of the gospel: "In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food" (Ac 6:11). Grecian Jews were people who had lived in dispersion throughout the Roman Empire and beyond, and then had come to Jerusalem to live out their lives. Their, native language was not the Aramaic of the Palestinian Jews. Their dress and customs were in some degree those of the ethnic groups among whom they had lived. Their attitude toward Gentiles and Gentile things was also, to some extent, affected by their workaday contacts with them.

Now, the Jews of Jerusalem had developed a system for distributing or food money to widows in need. The Christian Jews, excluded from that system by their confession of Jesus as the Messiah, made similar-arrangements. The Grecian (foreign) widows were being overlooked in the distribution. There is no reason to

think of any malice or spite here. Language differences, differences in customs, lack of a social network among them could contribute to the fact that Those widows were neglected.

The problem could have disturbed the peace and unity of the church. It could have been a lip-smacking gossip item for non-Christians to rejoice over. It could have been the occasion of a split in the church among people who were one in Christ and in his truth. People could have been spiritually harmed, perhaps destroyed.

"So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the spirit and of wisdom: We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word. This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism" (Ac 6:2-5). The seven men selected all had Greek names and one, Nicolas, had been born a Gentile. That election was an example of love and trust among brothers in the faith.

The New Testament text itself bears witness that the ministry of the apostles and their co-workers included efforts toward the peaceful integration of diverse cultural groups. To cite a small but significant example. Mark in his Gospel made it a point to translate Aramaic words and phrases and to use numerous Latin words and expressions. He was quite evidently writing for people who were not Hebraic Jews but more likely Romans or Italians (Latin speakers).

It is possible to have the doctrine of justification straight and yet harbor snobbish attitudes. First-generation Christians also needed to be warned: "My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism. Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in shabby clothes also comes in. If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, 'Here's a good seat for you,' but say to the poor man, 'You stand here' or 'Sit on the floor by my feet,' have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my dear brothers: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him?" (Jas 2:1-5). If he had been writing to certain WELS congregations in certain parts of the United States, James might have added: "Do not look through or past newcomers, well-dressed and impressive or otherwise. Do not keep your distance from new members until you are sure they'll behave like 'our kind of people' and fit in. Don't confuse your culture with the Lord's teaching. Rather, welcome them warmly and help them to become at home in their new fellowship."

Believers in the church's first generation needed to be treated with evangelical tact and Paul demonstrated it on many occasions. Let a single example of his approach to a rambunctious congregation suffice: "By the meekness and gentleness of Christ, I appeal to you..." (2 Cor 10:1). He wanted to be a Christ toward those immature, arrogant, rebellious Christians who had not completely recovered from their Gentile upbringing. Appealing, not demanding; meek, not assertive; gentle, not overbearing.

The attempt to be tactful must never degenerate into an insincerity which fails to speak clearly and frankly when that is called for. There is nothing patronizing in Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well, no condescending to the lost sinner from an alien culture (Jn 3:7-22). Plain talk to slay a sinner so that the gospel could raise her to life!

For the gospel's sake, for the ministry's sake, for the sake of souls Paul did not hesitate to name the special vice, the particular sin of a given ethnic group. He quoted one of their own (false) prophets to make the point: "For there are many rebellious people, mere talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision group. They must be silenced, because they are ruining whole households by teaching things they ought not to teach—and that for the sake of dishonest gain. Even one of their own prophets has said, 'Cretans are always liars, evil brutes, lazy gluttons.' This testimony is true. Therefore, rebuke them sharply, so that they, will be sound in the faith..." (Tt 1:10-13).

Stereotyping? Yes. Would Paul have acknowledged any exceptions to the stereotype? Of course. He applied the stereotype nevertheless to the false teachers who were troubling the churches on Crete. There is no condescending, "Make allowances; we must, put up with some of this; they can't do any better and we shouldn't

expect: them to." Rather, when the worst characteristics of their culture manifested themselves he said, "Rebuke them sharply."

"Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men, so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the, sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings" (1 Cor 9:19-23).

Paul would put himself at anyone's service, adjust to anyone's culture, accommodate himself to anyone's lifestyle (excluding, of course, what was sinful), if it might help to win that person to eternal life. Though his stomach may not have rejoiced at Gentile cuisine he was willing to become like the Gentiles in diet, never forgetting that he was under the law of Christ (the law of love). He would do that "so as to win those not having the law." Strong in his understanding of Christian liberty, he put himself in the sandals of those who were still weak in understanding, "to win the weak." Giving up his exercise of freedom in certain matters, he adapted his conduct to the sensitive consciences of those who needed to hear the message of salvation. Paul's words teach us a perspective to be coveted in any cross-cultural ministry, any gospel ministry: "I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some" (cf 1 Cor 9:19-23).

Conscience-bound by the truth and loyal to it, Paul could adapt to cultural differences with sensitivity and practicality. Although he refused to have Titus circumcised when the Judaizers at the Jerusalem Council demanded it, Paul took a different course in the case of Timothy (Ac 16:3). Here is a pattern for cross-cultural ministry! No truth of the gospel is compromised. No error is sanctioned. No confusion as to how we are saved impinges on the "Christ alone, grace alone, faith alone" teaching. No one is being robbed of his Christian liberty. Christians were being taught to love as Christ loved. (Cp also 1 Cor 8:1-13; 10:3-11:1; Rom 15:1-3).

Another area in which Paul demonstrated sensitivity among the Gentiles was in the matter of financial support. He did not hesitate to stress the principle that the laborer is worthy of his reward, and that those who preach the gospel should live by the gospel (1 Cor 9:12, 14, 15). Now, the Mediterranean world in the time of the New Testament was just as full of religious rascals, fake healers, and false prophets as ours is. They were money grubbers who did not help or heal or teach free of charge. On the beach at Mitylene, as Paul bade farewell to the elders of the church at Ephesus, urging them to be faithful in the care of souls, he reminded them of something in his own ministry to them: "You yourselves know that, these hands of mine have supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions. In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words of the Lord Jesus himself: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive'" (Ac 20:34f). "The weak" here are probably those who were weak in understanding that they ought to be helping to support those who preached and taught the gospel among them.

Paul wrote to people who had been heathen. They had not known the prophecies about the coming Savior. They had not enjoyed any fellowship with God's people. They did not know the covenant of free and faithful grace which God had established with Israel. They were far off from God's people and—far more tragic—from God himself. They had been without God and without hope because they had been without Christ. Jews were too ready to remind Gentiles of that situation and to congratulate themselves that this was not their state. Gentiles were too ready to be defiant about it. Paul refers to "the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility." There was actually a physical barrier in the temple at Jerusalem, a stone screen, beyond which no Gentile could go unless he wanted to risk his own life. Paul says that Christ has brokers down the barrier—not the stone screen but the cultural barrier—established by God's law. Christ did that by his blood, by his perfect sacrifice for sin. In going the way of the cross he not only established peace between God and man; he also established peace between man and man. He kept all the laws which had kept Jew and Gentile apart and then he rendered them irrelevant. He "made the two one," "one new man." They had been enemies but now were friends—no, they were family! (Eph 2:11-19).

That the congregations of Paul's mission fields were "mixed," cross-cultural, multi-cultural is evidence that Christians can live out the implications of what Christ did when he broke down the barrier between God and man, along with all barriers between people.

The attitudes and actions of the first-century believers made them attractive to some, at least, of the unbelievers. The manner and conduct of the Christians often served for what we today call "pre-evangelism." In Jerusalem the first congregation is described as "praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people" (Ac 2:47). The sentence which immediately follows is significant, showing the importance of the mindset of those who believe and proclaim the gospel: "And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved" (Acts 2:47b). Even those who were not in the fellowship of believers had to like and respect those Jerusalem Christians.

In our day, too, it ought to be possible for unbelievers to say of us: "Christians are helpful neighbors and good citizens." Our lives cannot make believers out of them, but the way we live might at least remove some obstacles to their hearing the gospel.

"Do everything without complaining or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe as you hold out the word of life" (Php 2:14-16). We have a responsibility to the family of God to let the family resemblance show. Children of God take after their Father and imitate their Brother. Shine in the darkness of a crooked and depraved generation. Better to live in the larger, often hostile, culture than to close ourselves off and hide in a closet and wait for a better day. A better eternity is coming, but meanwhile let us be all that God has called us to be in time.

The Message

What was the message which the apostles addressed to the varying cultures and subcultures of Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the uttermost parts of the earth? "Preach the good news," said Jesus. "Repentance and forgiveness of sins," he said. Every human being needs to hear it because every human being has sinned. It is good news for every human being because in Christ God has justified (acquitted, declared righteous) every human being—gratis: "There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus" (Rom 3:22-24), and "Just as the result of the trespass was condemnation for all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men" (Rom 5:18).

This justification, or declaration of righteousness is received by faith, not by works: 'In [the gospel] a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written, 'The righteous will live by faith'" (Rom 1:17). Jesus Christ wants nothing less from people than their trust, faith. He will not accept them on the basis of their best works, words, or intentions.

The jailer at Philippi asked Paul and Silas, "'Sirs, what must I do to be saved?' They replied, 'Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household'" (Ac 16:30). There was nothing cool or theoretical about the jailer's question. It is not asked by a man who wants to calmly discuss the problem of existence, who wants to "talk about religion." It is a desperate question and it needs an answer. The answer is not "Do this," or "Do that." It is, "Rely on him who has done it all, who has done it for you. The Lord Jesus Christ has experienced God's wrath in our place, suffering at Golgotha the God-forsakenness which we deserved. He has suffered the wages of sin to win the gift of God for us, eternal life. The God who is just and the God who is love reconciled his love and his justice at the cross in the Lord Jesus Christ. Trust him, and you will be saved."

The Book of Acts provides many samples of the apostles' message in the missions fields. At its heart was the crucified and risen Jesus Christ. It was a message of repentance and forgiveness of sins—law and gospel. It frequently included a summary of salvation history. When appropriate it was based on Old Testament history and prophecy. On Pentecost Peter, preaching to Jews from three continents and many cultures, included all of these elements in his message.

With the proselyte Cornelius and his household he recounted Jesus' ministry, made reference to "the prophets" (for Cornelius as a proselyte of the gate was familiar with the Jewish Scriptures), and struck the central theme which recurs in so many of the Acts accounts: "They killed him by hanging him on a tree, but God raised him from the dead on the third day" (Ac 2:32). Without the fact of Jesus' resurrection there would have been no point in talking about him.

Paul did not hesitate to preach repentance to the intellectuals of the Areopagus in Athens. He never got to name the name of Jesus because they stopped listening when he got to the resurrection, but he was certainly intending to preach the whole counsel of God. Immortality of the soul many or most of them could stomach, but resurrection? They held with the words of Aeschylus, one of their great writers of tragedy:

"When the dust has soaked up a man's blood.

Once he is dead, there is no resurrection."

Paul adapted his approach to his hearers, but his message of repentance was what it had been to everyone, everywhere: "Now [God] commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead" (Ac 17:31). Cross-cultural ministries might call for varied approaches but never for a different message.

Dramatic signs, like those of Pentecost, sometimes accompanied the proclamation, sometimes not. When they were present they served the cause of the gospel by getting people's attention, by attesting the apostles' authority, by signaling that the word had had its effect (cf Ac 10:44-46; 13:12; 14:8-18; 15:12; 2 Cor 12:12).

Nevertheless, the power that created faith and converted hearts and broke down cultural barriers was the gospel. "Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ" (Rom 20:17). When, at Antioch, Jewish Christian refugees from Saul's persecution began a cross-cultural ministry to Greeks, they told them "the good news about the Lord Jesus. The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord" (Ac 11:21).

After years of cross-cultural and multi-cultural ministry Paul made plans to visit the capital of the Roman Empire and preach there. What could he hope to say in that city of great men, empire builders, and important intellectuals—in that hostile culture? Should he keep a low profile, soften his message, perhaps just stay away? "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes; first for the Jew, then for the Gentile" (Rom 1:16).

The gospel is God's power to save. Even the cultured, the proud, the powerful people of Rome must be confronted by the dynamic message that a provincial Jew rose again to rescue the human race from eternal death to eternal life. Paul did not expect to be disappointed in the effect of that proclamation. Its power is not limited to any one group of people. It is for Jews and Gentiles, wise and unlearned. It is powerful in its sweetness to comfort little children and old people. It is powerful to make strong men and moralists and philosophers acknowledge their Savior.

It is powerful, "for in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last..." (Rom 1:17). Its righteousness is not that which God demands in his unchanging law, but that which God provides in his Son. It does not say, "Obey." It says, "Christ obeyed in your place, and gave his life to pay the penalty of your disobedience." It is God's power to impart salvation. It works the faith which accepts the righteousness. It convinces us that this righteousness is ours "by faith, from first to last."

Does that make for a ministry that marches from mass conversion to spectacular growth to splendid success? Paul had experienced opposition from the outside, had dealt with internal problems of the church, seen meager results often enough to know that the ministry is not one grand and glorious triumph after the other. But he kept on working, with joy, confident in the Lord's resurrection, sure of the gospel's power (Cp 1 Cor 1:21-32).

Better the negative reaction of some who hear than that any should go to hell because we have not disturbed their false peace, upset their corrupt world-view (culture), robbed them of some of their illusions.

Better opposition and failure in our attempts to serve those of another culture than never to try. And so the symbol of our faith and our preaching is not a couch but a cross.

Is there a sign that can attest the power of the gospel message in our lives so that others can be attracted to the good news for their lives? Yes, says Jesus: "By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (Jn 13:35).

The Methods

In this section there will not be much "This is how to do it." There are things to be learned, however, from the methods of the first practitioners of cross-cultural ministry.

When Jesus said, "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends, of the earth" (Ac 1:8), he spoke in the future tense, predicting and not commanding. On the other hand, he was preparing them for a ministry to many cultures. It was not going to be disorganized, random, or helter-skelter. He described an ever-widening circle: the urban culture of Jerusalem, the village culture of Judea, a mission to their "cousins" in Samaria, and then a far-flung mission to the ends of the earth.

The Book of Acts traces the ever-widening course of the gospel as the apostles carried out their ministry along the lines Jesus had promised and prophesied. Acts does not tell us much about the activities of the other apostles and we should not attach too much importance to later traditions, but it is reasonable and charitable to assume that they also did what the Lord commissioned them to do. The overall impression in Acts is of planned, organized activity. There were surprise opportunities which the apostles took advantage of. There were times when the Holy Spirit had a better idea and let them know it.

Cross-cultural ministry in the New Testament was carried on with groups and with individuals. A few examples will suffice to illustrate the point.

Jesus at the Well of Sychar, began by evangelizing a woman and spent the next two days winning a large number of Samaritans. She, incidentally, was not a leader in the community but quite the opposite.

Acts 8 tells us of Philip's successful work in an urban center of Samaria. In the midst of his busy and fruitful ministry with that despised ethnic group, an angel of the Lord told Philip to go to the desert area of the Gaza road. "So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch....This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, and on his way was sitting in his chariot reading the book of Isaiah the prophet. The Spirit told Philip, 'Go to that chariot and stay near it'" (Ac 8:26-29). You know the rest of the story. Philip, at God's bidding, left a successful cross-cultural ministry to preach Jesus to an African, a Gentile, a eunuch (excluded from the congregation of Israel by Deuteronomy 23:1)—a cross-cultural ministry to one.

Another characteristic of the cross-cultural ministries described in Acts is that the first stop for Paul and his co-workers, whenever possible, was the synagogue of whatever city they entered. There was a theological reason for doing so, the special place of the Jews in God's salvation economy. There was also an important practical reason: That was where Gentile proselytes gathered and they could provide an entrance into the Gentile community.

While it was natural and practical to use the Scriptures when addressing people who knew the Scriptures, Paul and Barnabas had to adapt to what was available at Lystra. There, after God through Paul granted healing to a man who had been lame from birth, the crowd of pagans shouted, "The gods have come down to us in human form!" (Ac 14:11). They prepared to offer sacrifice to Barnabas as the supreme god Zeus and to Paul as the messenger god Hermes. Paul and Barnabas did not, could not, appeal to the Old Testament Scriptures as they protested this action and shouted to the crowd. Instead, they appealed to the people's natural knowledge of the Supreme Being who is the God of nature: "The living God...made heaven and earth and sea and everything in them. In the past, he let all nations go their own way. Yet he has not left himself without testimony: He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy" (Ac 14:15-17). It is a good example as taking what is there and building on it, of meeting people where they are.

In his address to the Areopagus at Athens Paul also used what was there (Ac 17: 16-34). In that intellectual center, site of the world's oldest university, he found many gods and an altar inscribed TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. High philosophy had not put a stop to the service of idols. It had been said that there were more gods than men in Athens. Paul's distress over the number of idols in the city moved him to begin conversation in the marketplace, where he could make contact with the Gentiles who served those idols. The marketplace was not only a place of business. It was also the place where philosophers and gentlemen of leisure met to exchange ideas and to ask. "What's new?" As he set out to present his teaching and, if possible, preach the gospel Paul used the altar TO AN UNKNOWN GOD as his point of departure (Ac 17:23, 24). How foolish to build an image or a house for the One who created everything!

Another important feature of mission methods in the New Testament, was follow-up. Coupled with a zeal to reach out to the nations with the gospel was a pastoral concern for nurturing those who had heard and believed.

"When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them" (Ac 8:14). Paul and his co-workers regularly revisited the churches which had been founded during their mission tours. After preaching the good news in Derbe, where a large number of disciples were won, "they returned to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch, strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith" (Ac 14:21). Back in Antioch of Syria, the second missionary journey was initiated when "Paul said to Barnabas. 'Let us go back and visit the brothers in all the towns where we preached and see how they are doing'" (Ac 15:36). Paul and Silas, "went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches" (Ac 15:41). They then retraced the first journey, visiting the congregations of southern Galatia.

The entire third mission tour was more to revisit and nourish existing churches than to open new fields. Paul "traveled from place to place throughout the region of Galatia and Phrygia, strengthening all the disciples" (Ac 18:23). After an earlier brief visit to Ephesus at the end of his second tour (Ac 18:19-21), Paul returned to that city and worked there for three years (Ac 19:1ff; 20:31). During the same period he visited the troubled congregation at Corinth and then returned to Ephesus (2 Cor 2:1; 12:14; 13:1). From there he revisited the congregations of Macedonia (Ac 20:1ff), then spent three months in Greece (Ac 20:1-3) before taking the long way home—by way of Macedonia, Troas, and Ephesus (Ac 20:3ff)—to revisit the fields yet another time.

The visits were more than social visits, more than rallies for mutual encouragement. They were used for imparting further instruction, especially in places where the apostles had not been able to spend much time on their initial visits. An essential aspect of making and keeping and strengthening disciples is teaching them to obey everything that Jesus has commanded. The apostles did that. In his farewell speech to the leaders of the church at Ephesus Paul could say: "I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God" (Ac 20:27).

Earlier Barnabas had recognized that if the Greeks in Antioch were going to be steadfast they would need continuing instruction, and he would need help in providing it... "Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So, for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people" (Ac 11:25, 26). That was one example among many of team ministry.

The cross-cultural and multi-cultural aspects of the apostles' ministry presented special problems which required patient, firm, and tactful instruction in how faith works through love. (Cf 1 Th 4:9, 11, 12; 2 Th 3:6, 7, 11-13).

New Christians from any culture need to be taught that certain kinds of conduct and attitudes are sin. They need to be reinforced in this knowledge, especially since some cultures do not regard certain attitudes and actions to be sinful. "Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. Because of these, the wrath of God is coming. You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived. But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of the Creator" (Col 3:5-10).

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The MANDATE is timeless. The MOTIVATION is there everytime we read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest the Word of God. The Spirit-power is available to enlist, enable, empower Christians as the MANPOWER to carry out some part of the mandate. Lord, cultivate in each of us the MINDSET to do it, making faithful use of your timeless MESSAGE, adopting and adapting the METHODS of your servants the apostles, who began this work more than 1900 years ago.