

# **Between Two Worlds — Techniques And Practices Of A Soul Winning Ministry**

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*by David J. Valleskey*

The first three words of the title of this paper come from a book of the same name by John R.W. Stott. His book is subtitled, "The Art of Preaching in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century." The point he makes is that the preacher of God's Word stands between two worlds, the world of the Bible and the world of today. His job? To communicate the Word in such a way that he builds a bridge between the Bible world and the contemporary world. Stott writes:

A bridge is a means of communication between two places which would otherwise be cut off from one another by a river or a ravine. It makes possible a flow of traffic which without it would be impossible.... The chasm is the deep rift between the biblical world and the modern world.... It is across this broad and deep divide of two thousand years of changing culture (more still in the case of the Old Testament) that Christian communicators have to throw bridges. Our task is to enable God's revealed truth to flow out of the Scriptures into the lives of the men and women of today (Stott: 137, 138).

In another place Stott calls this process the "earthing of the Word." He puts it this way:

This earthing of the Word in the world ... is an indispensable characteristic of true Christian preaching. Indeed it is an obligation laid upon us by the kind of God we believe in and by the way in which he has himself communicated with us namely in Christ and in Scripture, through his living and his written Word. In Scripture he spoke his Word through human words to human beings in precise historical and cultural contexts; he did not speak in culture-free generalities. Similarly, his eternal Word became flesh in all the particularity of a first-century Palestinian Jew. In both cases he reached down to where the people were to whom he desired to communicate. He spoke in human language; he appeared in human flesh. Thus the great doctrines of inspiration and incarnation have established a divine precedent for communication. God condescended to our humanity though without surrendering his deity. Our bridges too must be firmly anchored on both sides of the chasm ... incarnation (exchanging one world for another) not just translation (exchanging one language for another) is the Christian model of communication (Stott: 145, 150).

If an American preacher standing in the pulpit of an American church can be described as standing between two worlds, how much more fittingly does the phrase between two worlds describe the American missionary working in a culture different from his own. The missionary actually lives in three worlds—the world of the Bible and its unique and universal message of salvation; the world he came from, the culture of which has greatly affected his world view; and the world in which he is working, with its often dramatically different culture.

The missionary stands uniquely between two worlds—that of the Bible and that of a contemporary culture different from his own. He thus has to take one step further than the American who communicates the Word to fellow Americans. He has to take the Word from the world of the Bible and communicate and apply it to himself. Then he has to take that same Word and communicate and apply it to those of the culture in which he is serving. In a sense we are talking about building two bridges, one from the Bible to the missionary and another from the missionary to his audience.

The purpose of this essay is to explore techniques that can help bridge the gap between cultures so the Word can get across and touch the hearts and lives of those among whom the missionary is working. We will not want to forget, however, that methods, techniques, etc. (call them what you will) are not what win souls. That is done by the Spirit through the Word. The Word itself possesses certain properties, or characteristics, that enable it to cut right through cultural layers and accomplish God's purposes. God's promise in the 55<sup>th</sup> chapter of Isaiah is a promise that can buoy up a missionary's spirits during difficult times when he is tempted to despair of bridging the gap between himself and his audience:

As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it (Is 55:9-11).

God's Word will accomplish God's purposes. Let's look briefly at just two of the properties of the Word which make it such an effective tool. For one thing, the Word is *clear*. The psalmist says to the Lord, "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path" (Ps 119:105). The purpose of a lamp and a light is to illuminate, of course, to show the way. God's Word is like a lamp and a light. It clearly shows the way, both the way to salvation and to a life of sanctification. It is so clear that even a child can understand what it is saying, as the psalmist declares: "The entrance of your words gives light; it gives understanding to the simple" (Ps 119:130). Writing to Timothy, Paul reminds him, "From infancy you have known the holy Scriptures" (2 Tm 3:15).

God's purpose in giving the Scriptures was not to *obscure* the truth, but to *reveal* it. That is why he chose to address us in human language rather than in the kind of inexpressible words which St. Paul heard when he was caught up to Paradise (2 Cor 12:4). Since we cannot rise to God's level, in love he chose to descend to our level and speak to us in words we can understand. "Everything that was written in the past," writes Paul to the Romans, "was written to teach us" (Ro 15:4). That which is not clear cannot teach; that which is clear can teach. And that is why God has made sure that the message of the Scriptures, objectively, externally, is clear: so that through it he might teach us.

The Bible is clear even in translation. Bible translator Eugene Nida, in fact, calls the Bible the most translatable religious book that has ever been written. Paul Hiebert amplifies that thought:

[The Bible] comes from a particular time and place (the western end of the Fertile Crescent) through which passed more cultural patterns and out from which

radiated more distinctive features and values than has been the case with any other place in the history of the world. If one were to make a comparison of the culture traits of the Bible with those of all the existing cultures of today, ... one would find that in certain respects the Bible is ... closer to many of them than to the technological culture of the western world. It is the western culture that is the aberrant one in the world (Hiebert: 154).

The Word is also *powerful*, that is, it possesses not just an external, objective clarity but also an inner clarity; for it is the means through which the powerful Spirit of God works. Jesus told his disciples, “The Spirit gives life.... The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life” (Jn 6:63). Not only do the Scriptures clearly reveal everything necessary for salvation and for a life of sanctification but also, by the power of the Spirit, they accomplish in people the salvation and sanctification which they clearly teach.

“The word of God is living and active,” the writer of Hebrews says (He 4:12). “You have been born again ... through the living and enduring word of God,” Peter writes (1 Pe 1:23). “The gospel ... is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes,” writes Paul to the Romans (Ro 1:16). Also in Romans he says, “Faith comes from hearing the message” (Ro 10:17). “Our gospel came to you,” Paul tells the Thessalonians, “not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit” (1 Th 1:5).

We emphasize these truths, not because we who have come together for this conference do not know them or believe them, but as an encouragement to us in our work. They also serve to remind us that, as we said above, techniques do not win souls. Winning souls is the work of the Holy Spirit of God through the clear and powerful Word. Techniques are peripheral. They are not unimportant. But they are peripheral. They are not an end unto themselves. They are, however, an important means to an end, the end being the conversion of souls through the presentation of the gospel. When we keep this distinction clearly in mind, then a discussion of techniques, methods, practices, etc., is certainly very much in place at a conference such as this.

We plan to build this presentation on techniques and practices of a soul-winning ministry around the following three concepts: understanding, building bridges, and communicating. We need to understand the culture in which we are working. We need to build bridges to groups and individuals. We need to communicate the gospel.

Each of these activities—understanding, building bridges, communicating—is vital to a state-side outreach ministry also, the perspective from which this writer can speak with some degree of experience. They are no less important on the world mission field and, we can safely assume, much more difficult to put into practice.

### **Understand the Culture**

The message of salvation that we want to bring to people must pass through a number of filters before it reaches the mind and heart of the receiver. One such filter, as even the beginning missionary well knows, is the culture of the person with whom we want to share the gospel. Things we say and things we do may mean one thing to us and something entirely different to the other person because he or she has been brought up to think and feel and act in ways different from the ways in which we have been brought up.

Lyman Reed quotes an incident reported in Roger Keesing's *New Perspectives in Cultural Anthropology* that underscores in a rather humorous way the need to understand the culture of other people:

A Bulgarian woman was serving dinner to a group of her American husband's friends, including an Asian student. After her guests had cleaned their plates, she asked if any would like a second helping: a Bulgarian hostess who let a guest go hungry would be disgraced. The Asian student accepted a second helping and then a third—as the hostess anxiously prepared another batch in the kitchen. Finally, in the midst of his fourth helping, the Asian student slumped to the floor; but better that, in his country, than to insult his hostess by refusing food that had been offered to him (Reed: 18).

Another example: Paul Hiebert talks about the importance of recognizing that the correlation between space and communication varies from culture to culture. North Americans tend to stand about four or five feet apart during casual conversation. This is our Social Zone (from three to twelve feet away from us). Anything beyond that is our Public Zone. People in this zone are considered to be too far away for normal conversation.

For more intimate conversation we get closer to people, about one to three feet. This is our Personal Zone. For the most personal conversation we have an Intimate Zone that extends from about one foot to touching.

Hiebert then shows what can happen if we don't understand that not every culture uses space in the same way:

Latin Americans have a similar spatial language, but their zones are smaller. They stand closer to one another when they converse, and they often embrace as a sign of greeting. So long as North and Latin Americans stay within their own cultures, there is no confusion. When they meet, however, there are misunderstandings. In casual conversations we North Americans are uneasy if the Latin Americans are in our Personal Zones, yet are discussing general things that we assign to the Social Zone. So we step back until they are at a comfortable distance. Now the Latin Americans are uneasy—we are in their Public Zones and out of reach. So they step closer until we are in their Social Zone. Again we are uneasy and step back, and again they feel distant and step forward. Neither of us is aware that our cultures use space in different ways. We end up feeling that the Latin Americans are pushy. They, in turn, feel that we are cold and distant (Hiebert 96, 97).

Missionaries who have been on the fields for any length of time can undoubtedly recount similar incidents that result from a failure to understand the intricacies of the cultures in which they are working. If we want to be able to bring the Word to people, we need to grasp how they customarily think and feel and act. We need to understand their culture as best we can.

How one responds to cultural differences will impact one's ability to reach people with the gospel. There are at least three ways that the missionary might react to the differences in culture he encounters. There is the response of *ethnocentrism*, the response that automatically rules out everything not done our way (Inch: 22). We see this kind of response not just on the

world mission field. A seminary graduate from a small town in the Midwest is assigned to a mission on one of the coasts or in the deep south. If he is convinced that everything that is done in this ministry must pass the small-town, middle of the USA cultural test, he is going to be in for a hard time. He will be putting up a barrier between himself and his potential congregation.

Such an attitude would appear to be even more detrimental on the world mission field, where the cultural differences are more pronounced. If Paul had been ethnocentric in his approach, his motto would not have been, "I have become all things to all men" (1 Cor 9:22). Rather, he would have insisted, "Do all things my way."

An ethnocentric approach tends to equate the gospel with the culture from which the gospel is emanating. Lyman Reed properly reminds us:

We have an imperative to present the gospel of Jesus Christ to all men.  
We have no imperative to present our culture to any man. Because we have learned the gospel within the trappings of our own culture, we tend to assume that our culture is the biblical culture. It is important that we separate our culture from the gospel (Reed 5).

Ethnocentrism, the "ugly American" approach, almost guarantees an unproductive ministry.

Another possible response to cultural differences is that of *cultural relativism*. Cultural relativism is the belief that all cultures are equally good; therefore no culture has the right to stand in judgment over another one. Such a view goes too far in the other direction. It is just as bad to say, "All cultures are right," as to maintain, "Only my culture is right."

David Hesselgrave points to the logical conclusion of that kind of thinking. He quotes from *The Meaning of Other Faiths*, written by Willard Oxtoby, who, to judge from this quotation, would have to be classified as a cultural relativist:

The Gospel authors said, "Believe," but they also report Jesus as saying, "Love." The core of Christian identity lays on us an obligation to love our neighbor—including our non-Christian neighbor—that must be weighed versus the obligation to assert the truth of our creed. What, then, if our insistence on preaching our beliefs is an offence to the integrity and identity of our non-Christian neighbor? Christ's commandment to love that neighbor may imply that we curtail our insistence on our own rightness. Put simply, to tell the Hindu, for example, that he cannot find salvation or fulfillment in his own tradition and community is morally a very un-Christian thing to do (Hesselgrave 1988:162).

Quite obviously, the truly un-Christian thing to do is to approach another culture from such a neutral, relativistic point of view!

That leaves a third approach, which some have called *cultural adaptation*. *Cultural empathy* may be a better way of putting it. It involves being sensitive to the culture in which one is working, with Paul seeking to be all things to all men, and yet, also with Paul, without sacrificing biblical principles. "Such an approach," McGavran contends, "will soon discover that Christianity is wholly neutral to the vast majority of cultural components" (McGavran 1974:68).

Cultural adaptation or empathy is not the same as "going native," though circumstances may at times warrant such action. International Christian Fellowship missionary Phil Parshall, in

an article entitled, “Evangelizing Muslims: Are There Ways?” reports how missionaries of the ICF made inroads into Muslim Bangladesh by adopting much of the Bangladesh lifestyle and adapting themselves to certain worship practices of the Muslim community. They dressed in the loose flowing garments of the Bangladesh peasant farmer. Their wives wore saris. Many of the missionaries grew full beards. They adopted Muslim dietary practices (e.g., no pork). Among their adaptations in worship practices were:

- provision of a facility just outside the worship center for washing prior to prayer;
- removal of shoes and sitting on the floor during prayer times;
- use of wooden stands as Bible holders similar to the ones used for the Koran in the mosque;
- offering of prayer with uplifted hands and often with eyes open in Islamic fashion;
- chanting of the attributes of God and the Lord’s Prayer;
- embracing in Muslim fashion; use of the term “Followers of Isa” (Jesus) to avoid the negative connotations of the word Christian;
- patterning the church organization after the loose-knit structure of the mosque.

We might take issue with some of these adaptations and call them gospel-compromisers instead. There were some positive results, however. In a period of four years after these ICF missionaries “went native,” seventy-five Muslims became believers. Up to that point these missionaries had met with virtually no positive response to the gospel (*Christianity Today*, Jan 5, 1979, pp 28-31).

I bounced this information off of my brother, who served as a WELS missionary in Malawi for six years. He responded that when Peace Corps people attempted to do the same in Malawi, i.e., to adopt the lifestyle of the Malawian, they were ejected from the country. The Africans thought that they were being made fun of.

The key seems to be an attitude of empathy and love. Becoming all things to all men does not necessarily mean walking in their shoes in his way. One can live in different kinds of homes, eat different kinds of food and wear different kinds of clothing as long as he doesn’t give the impression that different means better. It would appear that differences in lifestyle will not be a barrier if the people among whom the missionary works recognize that he is truly seeking to understand the way they think and feel and act and that he loves them.

Understanding the culture is not evangelism, but it is an important prerequisite to evangelism. It is really a part of what we are listing as a separate point in the outline of this essay. It is a first and, for that matter, an ongoing step in building bridges. We are differentiating cultural understanding from bridge-building in this way: understanding the culture has to do with study, observation, etc., while building bridges is the activity of reaching out to the people in that culture. Logically, one comes before the other. One first seeks to get a handle on the culture, to try to understand it, and then one seeks to penetrate it. In actual practice, however, both will be going on at the same time. One constantly is, or at least should be, growing in his understanding of the culture all the while he is seeking to penetrate it. One will have difficulty penetrating a society whose culture he isn’t seeking to understand. On the other hand, merely to seek to understand a culture without at the same time using that knowledge to build bridges to it is nothing more than a mental exercise. We move on, therefore, to the concept of bridge-building.

### **Build Bridges**

Evangelist Leighton Ford tells about a young Asian exchange student who spent a school year at a small college in the southeastern part of our country. By the end of the year she had become a Christian. When asked, How did it happen? she pointed to a girl who had befriended her and said, “She built a bridge from her heart to mine and Jesus Christ walked over it.”

Before you can witness to a person you have to get close to him or her. When a bond of trust has developed, the person is much more likely to give a hearing to the gospel. This is borne out by statistics from Mormon outreach in the United States. The conversion ratio as a result of cold turkey, survey-type calls is 1000 to 1. For every one thousand homes called on, there is one convert to the Mormon faith. On the other hand, if a friend invites a friend over to listen to a presentation by a Mormon missionary, one out of every two such presentations results in a conversion! Obviously, the friend’s endorsement means a lot.

Many of you are acquainted with the work of Win Arn and the American Institute of Church Growth. In one of his books Arn reported on the results of a survey of 14,000 people who were asked, What or who was responsible for your coming to Christ and your church? The overwhelming majority (75-90%) pointed to a friend or a relative (Arn: 43).

In a 1980 Gallup poll it was ascertained that 58% of those who had been unchurched before but now were attending church regularly first began going when they were invited by someone they knew. On the other hand, 63% of those who were not attending any church said that none of their friends or acquaintances had ever invited them.

Lyle Schaller makes the observation that in rapidly growing congregations friendship ties bring in more than kinship ties, while in declining congregations it is just the opposite. In rapidly growing congregations two-thirds to seven-eighths of recent adult new members first attended at the invitation of a friend or relative.

Admittedly, the above statistics are not drawn from a world mission field. But if friendship ties are that crucial to soul winning in the United States where Christianity is a known commodity, can they be any less important in cultures where Christianity is virtually unknown? The importance of bridge-building on the world mission field is borne out by the observation of Hesselgrave that almost 20% of the books reviewed in *Missiology* in the past fifteen years have dealt directly with this subject (Hesselgrave 1988:148).

Church historians indicate that from early on Christianity spread over bridges of friendship. Latourette writes: “The primary change agents in the spread of the faith ... were the men and women who earned their livelihood in some purely secular manner, and spoke of their faith to those whom they met in this natural fashion” (Latourette: 116). Michael Green maintains: “The early Christians knew that when the message of faith was heard and demonstrated by friends and family who were known and trusted ... receptivity to the Gospel increased tremendously (Green 210).

In his book, *Friendship Evangelism*, Arthur McPhee makes a good point when he writes:

Most men and women are not looking for religion, nor do they often have the time or inclination to ask themselves about the meaning of life, nor do they perceive themselves as miserable sinners in need of forgiveness. But most men and women are looking for love.... If you demonstrate by the way you live and relate to others that the love of God has become a reality in your experience, then you have something that is hard for people to walk away from. As someone has written, “The greatest proof of God’s love is a life that needs His love to explain it” (McPhee: 6, 7 5).

Let one more quote suffice, this one from an article by Joseph Aldrich entitled, “Lifestyle Evangelism—Winning through Winsomeness”:

God’s evangelistic strategy is beauty. Evangelism starts with the beauty of God, and it also involves a beautiful bride, the church. God desires that through our lives the world will see his beauty.... There is God’s evangelistic strategy in a nutshell: He desires to build into you and me the beauty of his own character, and then put us on display.... We can compare this beauty to music.... People need to hear this music; then they will respond to the words. And they need to hear it before they hear the words....

After a neighbor has seen that you are a person of integrity, and that you care about him, a time will come when, having heard the music, he will be ready to ask about the reason for the hope that is in you.... Neighbors must first hear the music by becoming aware of the beauty of God forming in our lives. In time some will want to hear the words to that music (*Christianity Today*, January 7, 1983).

This is precisely the process Peter had in mind when he instructed the wives of unbelieving husbands, “Be submissive to your husbands so that, if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without talk by the behavior of their wives, when they see the purity and reverence of your lives” (1 Pe 3:1,2).

The bridge to a person’s heart is the bridge of friendship, of love and caring . Across that bridge, then, one can bring the gospel. That brings up the question: How can we demonstrate that we care? How can we show ourselves to be friends who are not out to get but to give? This is where the felt, or perceived, needs of people come in. Where are they hurting? What are their needs? We know, of course, that their deepest need is the need for the salvation Jesus won for them. But they don’t know that, and they are not too likely to listen to a total stranger tell them that they are sinners on their way to damnation whose only hope is to be found in Jesus Christ.

So we start with surface needs, the needs that the people feel and perceive. We show ourselves to be friends by offering assistance in some of these needs. And then we look for opportunities to address their greatest need with law and gospel.

Some are quite wary of this “find a need and fill it” bridge-building technique. Upon returning from a visit to our missions in Southeast Asia this spring, I was anxious to share with my classes some of my experiences. One thing I shared was the way our missionaries over there are building bridges to people by teaching English and operating study centers. The class response was not what I expected. Several suggested that this was sort of a sneaky, under-handed technique. It presented a good opportunity for a discussion about the difference between pre-evangelism and evangelism and how such felt need-filling activities could properly be used as stepping stones for a presentation of law and gospel.

But it is not just seminarians who wonder about Christians making use of perceived needs as bridges to people. Some essays have been written in our circles in recent years that argue against the use of social needs to bring people to the point where they will hear the gospel. The essayists point to Robert Schuller of Garden Grove, California. In his first years in Garden Grove Schuller rang thousands of doorbells, asking people what needs they felt a church should satisfy. Over the years he has given the people what they said they needed, a message which is basically a law-less and gospel-less gospel of self-worth.

Obviously, Schuller abuses the principle. If one thinks that once he has satisfied the felt needs of a person, he has then done all that is necessary, that of course is a disaster. But abuse of a principle does not invalidate it. The Scriptures do not forbid the establishment of some point of contact, some common meeting ground. Think of Jesus and the woman at Jacob's Well and their common point of reference—earthly water. The Scriptures, in fact, give us very little in the way of prescribed pre-evangelism (or for that matter, evangelism) methodology. They simply tell us that people will not come to faith apart from the Means of Grace. How we get the Means of Grace to people is left largely to our sanctified Christian judgment. In general, I tend to agree with David Hesselgrave's comment that "only pre-evangelism that is divorced from evangelism is to be deprecated" (Hesselgrave, 1978:132), although that statement, too, can be open to misunderstanding.

Perhaps this is the place to say a few words about the receptive people concept. Church Growth people define receptive people as a segment of society friendly to the idea of becoming a Christian (McGavran 1980:170). Defined in that way, we would have to reject the whole concept of receptive people, since the Scriptures make it clear that all people by nature are spiritually dead and enemies of God (Eph 2:1; Ro 8:7). There are no degrees of receptivity. Dead is dead. An enemy is an enemy.

On the other hand, it is not at all incorrect to use the term "receptive people" in a different sense. When one takes the time to build a bridge of love and friendship to another person, this may well serve to make the individual willing to listen to what you have to say about weighty spiritual matters. In that sense he or she has become a receptive person.

Times of stress and upheaval may well serve the same purpose. We think, for example, of the jailer at Phillippi. The stressful events of that night made him quite eager to listen to what the Apostle Paul had to say. Engel and Norton in *What's Gone Wrong with the Harvest?* put it this way: "The existence of felt needs implies the existence of an open filter. For one reason or another, the individual's values, attitudes, and beliefs no longer satisfy. He is now in a stage of problem recognition and is receptive to solution" (Engel / Norton: 28).

In this connection it is valid to make use of such a tool as the Holmes-Rahe Stress Table. This table measures the stress factor in various times of transition, times in which a person's or family's normal, everyday behavior patterns are disrupted by some event that puts them into an unfamiliar and perhaps threatening situation. Death of a spouse or family member, for example, is high on the table and therefore a time conducive to talking about the kind of life-and-death matters a person may not be willing to discuss at other times.

The gospel will still be foolishness to the mind of natural man. It always is. Only the Holy Spirit can transform the foolishness of the gospel into the wisdom of God. But for the Spirit to be able to do this for an individual, he must first hear the gospel. Building bridges of friendship, of care and concern, meeting people at their point of perceived need, tends to make people receptive in the sense of their being willing to listen to what you have to say. And that is a very big step; for the Holy Spirit can take over after that—which brings us to the final part of this presentation, communicating the gospel.

### **Communicate the Gospel**

Everything else is preliminary, for "how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching [lit., proclaiming the message as a herald] to them? ... Faith comes from hearing the message" (Ro 10:14,17). In the time remaining

to us we want to look at three aspects of communicating the gospel: its complexity, its purpose, and finally at the methodology of gospel communication.

Communicating the gospel, especially across cultural lines, is a most complex task. Hesselgrave observes: “Thanks to modern technology, today’s missionaries find that the first 10,000 miles in mission are relatively easy. It is the last eighteen inches that are difficult!” (Hesselgrave 1988:147).

Even communication within a culture is no simple matter. Experts say that in normal communication people understand only 70% of what is said. If that is true about communication within the confines of one culture, what must be the percentage in cross-cultural communication!

For one thing, there is the most obvious barrier, that of language. Missionaries go to school to learn the language, of course, and, depending on its complexity, may become quite fluent in it.

But communicating is more than simply being able to put English words into the words of another language. In my visit to Hong Kong this spring, for example, I learned that the Chinese word for sin is the equivalent of crime and that to call a person a sinner is to call him a “criminal.” How, then, does one communicate the Bible’s truth, “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God?”

Hiebert tells about the difficulty of finding a word for God in the Telugu language of India. The early missionaries used the word *devudu*. *Devudu* means a supreme being, but not ultimate reality; and there are many such supreme beings, many *devas*, all of which will cease to exist at the end of time and merge back into *Brahman*, the source. Perhaps, then, the title “*Brahman*” should be used for God. But *Brahman* is not a personal being; it is a supreme force. There simply is no Telugu word, according to Hiebert, that adequately conveys what the Bible means by *theos*. So, what is the solution? Hiebert writes:

Generally we must choose the most suitable word from those in the local language and then make explicit through teaching and preaching where the biblical meaning of the word is different from its ordinary meaning in the culture. In the case of translating God into Telugu, we may choose to use *devudu* because it speaks of a personal god, but then we must make clear that the God of the Bible is the ultimate reality, not simply the highest being in the universe(Hiebert: 57).

The cross-cultural communicator is faced with a continual challenge to contextualize the gospel, that is, “to present the Christian message in such a way that it becomes a part of the cultural context of the receptor people” (Reed:18). From the reading I have done in preparation for this essay as well as from my brief exposure to our world mission fields, I have grown in appreciation of and admiration for our missionaries who are engaged in this difficult work and also in thankfulness to our God who makes them sufficient for the task (2 Cor 3:5).

Then we also need to remember that much of communication is nonverbal. In fact, in the average conversation between two persons within our culture less than thirty-five percent of the communication is verbal and more than sixty-five percent is nonverbal (Hesselgrave 1978:278). One needs to learn the body language of the culture in which he is working. Paramessages such as facial expressions, gestures, tones of voice, body postures, standing distances (and they are different from culture to culture)—all these affect the way in which a message will be understood (recall the example given on page 5 above).

One's lifestyle also affects one's message. Herbert Kane tells about Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, who was the leader of the sixty million Untouchables in India. Having come to realize that Hinduism had nothing to offer, Ambedkar studied Christianity under Bishop J. Waskom Pickett in Bombay. After six months of study he told Pickett, "When I am studying the life of Christ with you I feel that we Untouchables should become Christians; but when I examine the lives of the Christians here in Bombay, I say to myself, 'No,' this is not what we want." The result? In 1956 Dr. Ambedkar and 75,000 of his followers publicly renounced Hinduism and embraced Buddhism (Kane: 203, 204). "Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven (Mt 5:14)."

Missionaries will constantly be working at improving their ability to communicate the gospel. For what purpose? Jesus has made that clear. Our mission is to make disciples (Mt 28:19). That is significant. Our mission is not simply to communicate the gospel, although that certainly is an important aspect of our work. Our mission is to make disciples. The means by which disciples are made is the gospel.

It is important to keep in mind the distinction between our mission and the means to fulfill the mission. If we turn the means—proclaiming the gospel—into the mission, then our strategy might well be, if the law would permit it, simply to tour the streets of a city with a sound truck that is loudly broadcasting the gospel or to inundate an area with gospel tracts dropped from an airplane, and then to go home.

If, on the other hand, our mission is to make disciples, we will be concerned with what happens when the gospel is proclaimed. We will be intent on making it more than a one-shot effort. We will employ whatever methods it takes to assure an ongoing hearing. We will not just plant the seed, but also do what we can to water and cultivate it. We will be patient, persistent, persuasive presenters of the gospel, not just haphazard broadcasters of it.

This brings us to a third aspect of communicating the gospel: the methodology of communicating it. In what follows we will be borrowing heavily from parts four and five (pp 47-73) of a series of essays we prepared in the fall of 1987 for the annual Pastors Institute at the Seminary. The series is entitled, *A Portrait of Paul—With Application to Current Trends and Methods In Mission Work*.

A study of the Book of Acts and the Pauline Epistles reveals a number of methodological principles Paul followed in communicating the gospel, all of which have a bearing on gospel communication yet today. We will look at seven such principles.

### **1. Wherever he went, paul proclaimed one basic message.**

His message was Jesus, crucified and risen. "I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you," he tells the Corinthians; and then he goes on to describe that gospel: "Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures ... he was buried, ... he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures" (I Cor 15:1,3,4). This was, as he puts it, a message of first importance (I Cor 15:3). In the synagogue of Antioch of Pisidia he preached about the death and resurrection of Jesus through whom alone there is forgiveness of sins (Ac 13:2-3). In Thessalonica on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead (Ac 17:2,3). In Athens he preached the good news about Jesus and the resurrection (Ac 17:19).

Paul was single-minded in his message, nothing but Christ, crucified and risen. Missionaries today are called to proclaim the same gospel. Anything else is really no gospel at all (Ga 1:7).

## **2. Paul did not follow a standard approach in proclaiming that one message.**

His was very far from a “canned speech” approach. He communicated the one message in a manner relevant to each situation. Edgar Hoenecke, in a *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* article, “St. Paul’s Missionary Approach to the Unchurched,” says it well when he speaks of “the complete freedom from hidebound rules in St. Paul’s approach and his remarkable flexibility in adapting himself and his message to all sorts of people and situations.” Paul, he writes, “is the greatest exponent and teacher of Christian doctrine after Christ, and yet one will search in vain for a set pattern of dialectic preaching or teaching in his sermons” (*WLQ*, Vol 61, p 132).

A study of the three mission messages that Luke has preserved for us in the Book of Acts bears this out. They are preached in three dissimilar situations to three dissimilar audiences and serve as a fine example of what Paul means when he says, “I have become all things to all men [in the way he communicated the gospel also] so that by all possible means I might save some” (1 Cor 9:22; cf Ac 13:16-41, Paul at Antioch of Pisidia; 14:15-17, Paul at Lystra; and 17:22-31, Paul at Athens). Since the circumstances were different the approach was also different in each of these places.

What does this say about relying on one particular method today, e.g., TAS, EE, RSVP, GGE, etc.? We will return to this point in a few minutes.

## **3. Paul’s message was contextual and conciliatory, but not compromising.**

He related his message to the cultural context of the society in which it was proclaimed and he did so in a non-polemical way. He did not set out to alienate his audience, but to woo and win it.

But though Paul’s message was contextual and conciliatory, it was never compromising. He tells the synagogue worshipers in Antioch of Pisidia: “Through him [Jesus] everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the law of Moses” (Ac 13:39). In Lystra he calls the practice of idolatry “worthless” (Ac 14:15). In Athens he ends his message on the one truth he knew the council of the Areopagus would have the most difficulty accepting, the resurrection. He was uncompromising, since only the truth sets people free (Jn 8:32).

Prof. Wendland, in an essay written in 1981 entitled, “An Evaluation of Current Missiology,” applies this principle to the world mission field today:

When, for example, an American is doing mission work in Africa, he should be aware that he is working among people who think in different patterns, speak in a different language, and express themselves in other ways. People coming to Christ should not be made to feel that he is a foreign Christ (p 14).

Yet at the same time Wendland sounds the caution: “Where native custom and culture come into conflict with the teachings of Scripture, we’ll not be afraid to proclaim the truth no matter how disturbing this might be to cultural sensitivities” (p 15). Sensitivity to the truth and

sensitivity to the situation of the people to whom the missionary wants to bring the truth—when both of these factors are present, the approach will be contextual and conciliatory, yet without compromising the message.

#### **4. Paul was persuasive in his proclamation, but he did not depend on the power of human logic.**

Church Growth people talk about the 3 P's of evangelism: presence, proclamation and persuasion. Persuasion is defined in various ways, but C. Peter Wagner's definition is similar to the one that most Church Growth literature follows: "Persuasion evangelism says that a person is not regarded as evangelized unless and until he or she becomes a disciple of Jesus Christ and a responsible member of a local church" (Wagner :122). In the terminology in more general use among us, we would probably equate this third P with follow-up.

We are not referring to this third P when we say that Paul was persuasive. We are rather referring to the fact that when Paul proclaimed the gospel he did so in a persuasive manner.

Paul knew quite well, of course, that he had no power to convert anyone. He realized that the power of sin and Satan over people were greater than his power to overcome these enemies. Only the Spirit's power through the gospel could work the mighty work of faith (cf I Cor 12:3; 2:4).

Yet at the same time Luke uses a number of verbs in the Book of Acts to demonstrate that when Paul and his companions proclaimed the Word, they did so in a very persuasive manner. He uses Greek words that have in them such ideas as discussing, expounding, arguing, persuading, demonstrating, proving, refuting, disputing. A few examples:

On three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead. . . Some of the Jews were persuaded (Ac 17:2 4) .

Every Sabbath he reasoned in the synagogue, trying to persuade Jews and Greeks (Ac 18:4).

He [Apollos] vigorously refuted the Jews in public debate, proving from the Scriptures that Jesus was the Christ (Ac 18:28; cf also 9:22 29; 18:19; 19:8,9; 24:25).

Why would Luke use such words when he as well as Paul knew well that it was not the skill of the speaker but only the power of the Spirit that could persuade people that Jesus was the Christ? There is no contradiction at all here. Paul had utmost confidence in the power of the Word; and it is precisely this confidence that would have led him to preach and teach it in such an unashamed, bold, confident, persuasive and forceful manner. He expected results, since God himself had promised them (Is 55:10,11).

Missionaries today, with Paul, can be positive, optimistic and confident as they communicate the gospel. They can put their whole heart and all their being into it, because they know it will be effective. Just the Word, spoken persuasively and unapologetically, that's all that is needed for the Spirit to accomplish his gracious purposes.

#### **5. Paul did not hesitate to give first-person testimony, but his emphasis was on the gracious acts of god.**

In our circles we tend to shy away from so-called personal testimony evangelism. Perhaps we are afraid that it might turn the spotlight on ourselves instead of on Jesus. One must admit that there is always the danger of that occurring. But that did not keep the psalmist from declaring. “Let me tell you what God has done for me” (Ps 66:16). Nor did it keep Jesus from telling the cured Gerasene demoniac, “Go home to your family and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you”(Mk 5:19).

Paul, too, did not let the danger of the possible abuse of personal testimony stop him from telling others what Jesus had done for him. Think, for example, of how he vividly described the day of his conversion when he stood before Felix (Ac 24) and later before Agrippa (Ac 26). Or recall his autobiographical reminiscences in Philippians 3:4ff or, my personal favorite, in 1 Timothy 1:12-17:

I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me faithful, appointing me to his service. Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.

Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life. Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen.

Testimony evangelism, properly done, can certainly be an aid in communicating the gospel. Basically, it is a matter of telling what Jesus means to me, which involves describing what life is like without Jesus and what it is with him as my Savior and Lord.

## **6. Paul nurtured those he evangelized.**

Already on his first visit to a place he sought to build upon the basic gospel message, though in many cases this was not possible, at least to any great degree, since he wasn't permitted to remain in many communities for any great length of time. When he did have that opportunity, however, as at Ephesus, he was able to tell the elders of that congregation, “I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God” (Ac 20:27). Even at Thessalonica, where he perhaps spent no more than a month, he managed to find time to teach the Thessalonians not just the basic message of sin and grace, but even the doctrine of the Antichrist (2 Th 2). His goal, wherever he worked, was “to present everyone perfect in Christ” (Co 1:28). That is also why he revisited the churches he had founded, some as many as three times, and wrote them letters.

Another Church Growth principle is “discipling, not perfecting,” that is, one should not demand too much from new converts. First should come discipling, “the removal of distracting sinful gods and spirits and ideas from the corporate life of the people and putting Christ at the center on the Throne” (McGavran 1955:14), and only later perfecting, or “teaching them all things.” The practice of our missions, which sees making disciples and perfecting disciples as actions that should not be separated, is much more in line with Pauline practice.

## 7. Paul trained others to communicate the gospel.

As Paul had earlier been an apprentice under Barnabas, so, in the course of Paul's long and fruitful ministry, many were apprentices under Paul, men such as Timothy and Titus. As Jesus had called the Twelve to be with him before he sent them out to preach (cf Mk 3:14), so these men were with Paul, some on a more regular basis than others, receiving from Paul a one-on-one seminary training so they, too, could go out as communicators of the gospel.

We said above that Paul did not follow one standard outline in proclaiming the gospel. This means that when his co-workers observed him in action it is not likely that they heard him say the same thing each time. Rather they would have seen how he varied his approach according to the situation.

Should we today, then, depart from Paul's example and attempt to follow one standardized approach as a learning aid for those whom we are training to be evangelists? The answer to that question cannot be found in the Book of Acts. Acts describes how Paul communicated the gospel. But *description* is not the same as *prescription*. We will have to look at the situation as it prevails today and use our sanctified Christian judgment to make a decision. In at least two of our fields, Hong Kong and Taiwan, an attempt is being made to utilize just one basic evangelism outline, a modified version of Kennedy's Evangelism Explosion, throughout the mission.

On a personal level, in my stateside ministry I felt that I became a more effective evangelist and certainly a better trainer of evangelists at the time that I began to utilize one basic evangelism approach. First it was Talk About the Savior and then God's Great Exchange. I found, that using just one basic outline did not at all cramp my style, nor do I feel that it hindered the Holy Spirit's work. I learned that I could use those outlines, with some adaptation, on virtually every occasion I presented the gospel, whether on a formal evangelism call or on an informal basis. And those who came with me on calls soon could reproduce what they heard me say.

This essayist sees some real benefit to be gained from sticking to one main approach, an approach whose concepts are clear and simple and logical and can be easily taught to evangelist trainees. Such a clear, simple and logical law-gospel presentation is also just what we want to communicate to the one who does not yet know Christ.

Between two worlds—that is where the missionary stands, between the world of the Bible and its message of life and salvation and the world of a culture that is foreign both to the missionary and to the Bible's message. The missionary will seek to grow in understanding of that culture and to build bridges of love and care and concern to its people. Then, over those bridges he will bring the gospel. And souls will be won for eternity. We have God's promise for it.

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