Beginning Cross-Cultural Outreach (With Special Reference to Hispanics)

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In May, 1980, Roman Catholic Archbishop Robert Sánchez addressed the National Conference of Catholic Bishops in Chicago. He quoted Acts 19:2-3, which tells of the occasion when Paul asked newly converted believers in Ephesus if they had received the Holy Spirit. They replied "We have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit (NIV)." Archbishop Sánchez commented: "My brother bishops, let us hope that when we are asked whether we have received among us and served the Hispanics in this country we do not have to answer, 'We did not know that there were Hispanics." While we may disagree with his application of Scripture, Sánchez makes a good point. Christian churches can no longer ignore the many ethnic groups that are pouring into our nation. Of those groups, Hispanics are one of the largest: In 1990, there were 22 million Hispanics in the U.S.A.; By the year 2000, there will be 31 million; By the year 2025, 60.9 million. Within next 25 years, they will become the largest minority in the United States. Jesus and the Apostles didn't forget about the people of different culture that surrounded them: Jesus brought the water of life to a Samaritan woman; Peter brought the gospel to Cornelius, and Philip to the Ethiopian. Remembering that God "wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth" (I Timothy 2:4 NIV), we want to recognize the ethnic groups in our areas of ministry and bring them the gospel. However, doubts about our ability to be the bearers of good news to people of different culture and language frequently permeate our thinking, and may prevent us from pursuing it. This paper is not a comprehensive, but a cursory study of how to begin cross-cultural outreach. It is the result of research and the limited experience of the author. The author is not completely sure of some of his conclusions, but intends to put them into practice if God should allow it, and amend or reject them if they prove invalid or ineffective. The practice of cross-cultural outreach will be referenced to Hispanic ("Hispanic" = person of Spanish-speaking descent living in the United States) outreach, since in this area, the author has some experience.

Although the best form of pre-evangelism is friendship, pre-evangelism often consists of living in the same culture as the evangelism prospect for one's entire life and then spending thirty minutes "getting to know" the person on a more personal level and then presenting the message of sin and grace. This method often works in gaining a hearing, because cultural barriers are practically non-existent. It is no mystery to an American what another American is like and believes, or what his customs are. However, beginning to evangelize people of a different culture requires much more than thirty minutes of pre-evangelism, because of the cultural differences that separate us. Although we all are human beings and share many common traits and customs, yet there are significant differences between the typical American and the typical Hispanic, for example. How can a Lutheran pastor or layman ever hope to overcome these cultural barriers and bring the Word of Life to Hispanics? Cultural bridges from one culture to the other must be constructed. First, we must become learners...

Before attempting evangelism to a different culture, we must learn as much as possible about that culture. The language of the people is an important link in learning about their culture, especially if our goal is to reach out to them with the gospel eventually.

Language learning is more than simple mechanical ability to produce acoustic signals so as to buy, sell, and find your way about; it is a process by which we make vital contacts with a new community, an new manner of life, and a new system of thinking. To do this well is the basic requirement of effective missionary endeavor. iii

The new language will eventually be used for teaching and preaching God's Word. Keeping in mind that "experts judge that communication is only about eighty percent effective in the most ideal circumstances," we have even more incentive to learn the language of the people we wish to reach! David Hesselgrave writes, "Missionary communication should be 'receptor-oriented." A missionary always keeps his hearers in mind when attempting any communication. An important way to orient the gospel message to the receptor is by learning his language. Most Hispanics feel more comfortable speaking Spanish than English, and if we think that that will change, we may be in for a surprise. Esaúl Salomón calls Spanish the "language of the heart," and comments that "it applies whether they arrived in this country in the last decade or in the last century. My experience is that Hispanics are intent on preserving their culture and language and that this trend will continue into the future." Learning the language also shows a "genuine regard and respect for that culture and its people," and may open up later opportunities to bring the gospel to them. Learning the "target" language is a start, and plays an important part in learning about a culture, but there are more direct ways to learn about the new culture.

Various definitions for culture have been given, of which, a basic one is as follows: "Culture is a way of thinking, feeling, believing. It is the group's knowledge stored up for future use." Culture is shared by a group and has several layers it is the deepest layer, which consists of values, beliefs and worldview that needs to be changed: "The missionary is an agent of cultural change, changing, through God's Word, that in a culture that does not conform to Biblical culture." Even though superstitions may be part of the Mexican's culture, those cultural beliefs must be changed by the Holy Spirit. The missionary must concern himself with the culture of his target group, because, "although Christianity is supra-cultural in its origin and truth, it is cultural in its application." Christianity cannot be effectively communicated without this knowledge.

A good place to begin is by reading about the target culture. Many books have been written about Hispanics (as well as many other ethnic groups). The author has often neglected this simple, informational approach that only involves a trip to the Public or Seminary library. Others have gleaned much information for us—why not use it! However, learning about the target culture dare not stop at the last page of a book; it is essential to become an active. participant in the culture.

Eugene Nida, commenting on missionaries who have attempted to identify with a foreign culture by wearing the same clothes as the natives, or living in the same style house, says that this is seen as "cheap paternalism," and goes on to state: "The identification which is required is not imitation but full participation as a member of the society." We are not members of their culture, so although we can never abandon our own culture, we must become participating members ("honorary members") of their culture if we are to effectively gain an audience for the gospel and gather a fellowship of believers that will become a congregation. As was mentioned before, friendship evangelism is very effective. To become the friend of a person of a foreign culture may take a short time or a very long time. We, as Lutherans, may tend to see pastoral activity that does not involve directly sharing the gospel as unnecessary and an unfaithful use of time. However, it may be necessary to forego the preaching of the gospel, at least at first, so as to make the cultural connection and gain access into the culture as a participating member. The

gospel is still "the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes" (Romans 1:16 NIV), but it needs an audience and needs to be communicated meaningfully. Be willing to take a lot of time to study and observe patiently! Skipping this step could hinder our efforts, in that we may not gain an audience for the gospel, or we may offend culturally, or not communicate the gospel meaningfully. The next question is, "how is it possible to actually become a 'participating member' of another culture?" We now consider the practice of ethnography.

We have a great example of "ethnography" in our Savior. He "hung around" the lost sheep of Israel—with the "sinners" and outcasts of his land—so that he could reach them with the Good News. There may not be a direct correlation between Jesus' work and modern day in that the people with whom he associated were already a part of his Israelite culture (although he did also associate with Gentiles), and as the Son of God, he knew each one of them intimately! But one principle is the same: personal interaction with the target group. James P. Spradley stresses that the missionary should "learn from people" rather than studying people. This should be done in face-to-face encounters." The ethnographer's goal, as Spradley states, is to *learn* from the people. To do this, one must be where the people are. Depending on the community in which they live, one could begin by establishing initial contacts by meeting them in public places where they function comfortably, by participating in community activities with them, by a doorto-door canvass of their neighborhood or by many other possible means. Once personal contact has been initiated, Spradley suggests that the ethnographer begin, "with questions that make broad descriptive observations possible, proceed[ing] to more in-depth and focused observations, and conclud[ing] with selective observations that will enable the ethnographer to search out certain 'cultural themes.'"xiii In his book Change: Mission and Ministry Across Cultures, Pastor E. Allen Sorum suggests conducting an "ethnographic interview," (see pp.156-157 for sample interview) and presents a user-friendly program for the congregation that is interested in reaching out to another ethnic group. As contacts are made, the ethnographer stresses to the people from the target culture that they are his teachers, and that he is their student; that he wants to learn from them. Most likely, they will respect that and help him in his task. In these cross-cultural contacts, it is important to observe and record the ins and outs of the target culture—the way they think, and what they believe. One important part of a cultural system is what it tends to believe about the supernatural. Learn about the culture's religion well.

As an example, Hispanics tend to be Roman Catholic, but this may be only on the surface. Learn about Roman Catholicism, but also look for other pagan beliefs that may be a part of the Hispanic's belief system, for example, superstitions or Indian myths from the place of their or their ancestors' birth. Many pagan beliefs may have slipped into and remained in their belief system. Eugene Nida gives an example of fruitful observation by a missionary in West Africa, who spent many hours talking with the elders of a village about their beliefs about God without stating his own. After many hours, out of curiosity, they asked him what his beliefs were and he had an opportunity to bring the gospel to them, in a sense, at their own unknowing invitation. In the process, he also learned what they believed about God, something necessary if he was to teach them in the future. XiV All observations must be carefully recorded and saved. However, the work of learning is not over. The would be cross-cultural missionary must next learn about and understand his own culture, that is, to achieve *cultural self-awareness*. This may sound unnecessary, since we have lived in our respective cultures all our lives, and it would seem that we would have a vast knowledge of it. Paul Hiebert puts that assumption to rest:

Two of the greatest problems faced by missionaries entering new cultures are misunderstandings and premature judgments. These are particularly damaging because

we are generally unaware of them. As individuals we have strong convictions about reality. Rarely do we stop to ask whether others see it as we do, since it seems so obvious that things are as we see them. xv

Nevertheless, things are not always as we see them, and it is this realization that is sought in studying one's own culture. Hiebert goes on to list some peculiarities of the North American world view: 1) The world is real and rational, 2) We love to be analytical, 3) We have a mechanistic world view, 4) We are characterized by individualism, 5) We assume the equality of all human beings, 6) We give priority to time over space, and 7) We put an emphasis on sight, rather than sound, touch, taste or smell. xvi In the course of participating as a learner in another culture, and after studying our own culture and its assumptions, we will begin to notice the outstanding characteristics of the target culture and how similar or different they are to our own Western cultural characteristics and worldview. As an example, the following list is included of some notable Hispanic characteristics. It is not exhaustive, and may not apply to the people of every Latin American country (Mexico, Cuba, Argentina, etc.) to the same degree. More study of the target Hispanic culture on the reader's part will be necessary to expand or modify the list.

Religion

Approximately eighty-five percent of Hispanics are Roman Catholic. However, as Salomón states, "Generally, Roman Catholic Latin Americans do not know the Jesus of the Bible or the full Gospel as revealed in Scripture." Because of the Spanish conquest and the forced conversion of many of their ancestors, pagan Indian beliefs and superstitions are commonly found mixed in with Roman Catholicism. This is not seen as a contradiction, since both Catholic and indigenous systems are based mainly on tradition and not on Scripture... God's grace is many times overshadowed by the pagan desire to earn salvation. There are certain barriers that make it difficult for the foreign missionary to speak to the Hispanic about his religion.

- 1) The Mexican, at least, views Catholicism as a part of his culture: Rather than a religious faith, the Roman Catholic tradition in Mexico has become a symbol of cultural identity. Viewed as an intrinsic element of their culture, their Roman Catholic tradition is zealously guarded. The Mexican has been conditioned to actively reject any church that is not Roman Catholic. His identity is linked with the Roman church, and Protestants in Mexico are looked upon disparagingly; they are thought to have lost some of their national identity. xix
- 2) Disregard for "organized religion"

 For Hispanics, religion is a personal thing: the institutional church does not necessarily relate to their religious experience. Being a Catholic is a set of beliefs, rituals, relationships, and even behaviors. But it does not necessarily include full participation in an organized church, with structures, authority, and obligations. xx

Therefore, "New information, and particularly information regarding an emotional subject as deep-seated as religion, must be broached with caution." There is also stiff "competition" that will be encountered from other churches, especially Pentecostals, who have made significant inroads into Latin America, and among Hispanics in the United States. In fact, in some countries, the numbers of Evangelicals are growing at an annual rate of ten percent. *xxii*

Relationships and the Family

"Warm, personal and convivial relationships are valued—where this is complemented by a respectful distance for and from the outsider. Once a bond of trust is established, however, often this will allow one to gain entrance into the extended family unit." One Puerto Rican woman, a member of a small Lutheran congregation on that island that had lost most of its members, gave the author a cultural perspective which may validate Salomón's observation, on why the missionaries were unable to reach the people living in the town. She said that another missionary who had served that congregation in the past used to pick one day every week when he would spend the day in town, simply walking around and talking with all the townspeople, whether they were members or not. She observed that in time, many townspeople respected him as a member of their community and came to him for spiritual help and some eventually became members of the church. She lamented the fact that this was not happening at the present time.

The families that make up a typical Hispanic community are extended families, which consist of networks of blood relatives, friends, *compadres* and *comadres* (Similar to godparents), and *padrinos* (patrons). The family is highly valued and the separation of the family is not seen as progress, but as a loss. **xiv** As we will see later, the strong family aspect of Hispanic culture can provide a wonderful opportunity for evangelism. However, there are also barriers that the family can present. Salomón illustrates: "Often, because the family culturally tends to be highly protective of its members, particularly female members, only those who belong to the kinship web of family members are comfortably allowed into the private circle of the home."**xxv**

Work

"Work, however, for the Mexican serves a utilitarian purpose and rarely is an object of obsessive energy. Work is not attached to the Mexican's identity, but it provides the material means by which the family can survive and function." Because of less emphasis on work and more on relationships, it may be easier to reach and speak to Mexicans (easier than the typical two-parent-working family), since they may be less engrossed in their careers, and spend more time at home.

National Chauvinism

Herbert Kane writes.

On several occasions nationalism proved inimical to the progress of the gospel. On two occasions Paul and his gospel were rejected because he and his message were Jewish. (Acts 16:20-21)...Whether Paul's doctrine was good or bad, true or false, was beside the point. It was *foreign*, and therefore unacceptable. xxvii

This attitude may come in to play when dealing with any ethnic group. However, it may be found among Mexicans more frequently, since even though they are living in a foreign nation, their goal is usually to return to Mexico eventually, and therefore are intent on preserving their culture at all costs, rejecting American ways if possible.

Respect

At least in Mexican culture, respect has a different meaning than in North American culture. "For the Mexican, respect is due someone because of his particular status in the family or society, while to the Anglo-American, respect is something due to someone when it is

personally earned." This shows the importance of gaining access to extended family—that is the way respect is acquired!

From this sampling of characteristics of Hispanics, it is obvious that learning the target culture well is essential, because it allows the missionary to adapt his methods. The message of the Scriptures always remains the same, but the method of presenting it may be changed or altered to fit the culture and worldview of the people. Paul could say, "To the Jews, I became like a Jew, to win the Jews..." (I Corinthians 9:20 NIV). He did not become a Jew, following the Jewish religion, but he adapted his behavior and the way he presented the gospel so as to gain an audience for the Word and preach it meaningfully, so that the Jews would understand exactly what God was telling them through Paul. Paul used what is commonly called in our modern world contextualization. Eugene Nida explains what contextualization is and how difficult it is to achieve:

Without a doubt, one of the most difficult aspects of evangelism in Latin America is to discover those means by which the communication of the gospel may be made in a relevant and socially acceptable manner. This does not mean that the Good News must be distorted in order to accommodate it to men's ideas. Rather, it must be presented in such a context as to make it really "Good News," not just strange propaganda. xxix

We study the culture of a people with the purpose of contextualizing the Scriptural message in terms of that culture, so that it means to them what God wants it to mean to them. Hesselgrave points out the hazards of not contextualizing the message of Scripture: All messages that are received by the respondent are "decoded...in terms of previous experience." If efforts have not been made to contextualize the gospel, the respondents may simply absorb the gospel message into their old religious system, such as the indigenous peoples of the Americas did when forced to become members of the Roman Catholic Church—they simply substituted the names of the Christian God and Catholic saints for their own gods. He also points out that. "If the Christian missionary going to other cultures does not adapt his message [contextualization], he will find himself preaching in Tokyo as he would in Toledo."xxxi It must be stressed again, that contextualization does *not* mean changing the message or meaning of the Scriptures, or accommodating them to human thinking or reason. Rather it means adapting or changing, for example, the words or illustrations we normally use to make the concepts they describe relevant and understandable in the target culture. For example, when instructing former Roman Catholics about the "communion of saints," it is necessary to either find another word for "saint," or explain how the word "saint" is defined in the Bible. If one assumes that former Roman Catholics have the scriptural understanding of what a "saint" is, and therefore the true concept of the "saint" is not explained to them, they will continue in their Roman Catholic understanding of this concept. At the same time, they (and most likely the pastor instructing them) will think that they believe what the Scriptures teach. One can see how difficult a task contextualization is, when we realize that we must take the message of the Scriptures, which was written in a different time and culture than our own, and communicate it to people of another culture in a meaningful way in the context of their culture, while at the same time letting as few of our own cultural predispositions into the message as possible. xxxii In view of this, we can thank our God that the Holy Spirit is able to overcome our weak efforts and communicate the gospel through us, but that should never lead us to neglect or downplay the process of contextualization. In his book, Planting Churches Cross-Culturally: A Guide for Home and Foreign Missions, David Hesselgrave presents a list of questions to be asked when attempting to contextualize the Biblical message, putting it into language the hearers will understand:

- (1) At what points are the hearers most likely to misunderstand the message?
- (2) Which of the religious beliefs held by the respondents are similar to Christian doctrine and can be expected to provide conceptual bridges for communication? Which are decidedly different? (Care must be exercised here. What we view as similarities may be only *seeming* similarities and may occasion significant misunderstanding unless treated carefully)
- (3) To what concerns of the target audience does Christ speak with authority and clarity?
- (4) What adaptations have successful Christian communicators used in addressing this or similar audiences? **xxxiii*

Much more could be said about contextualizing which is beyond the scope of this paper. Many books have been written that will guide the willing missionary in his quest to utilize this all important tool for communication.

Opportunities for Evangelism Among Hispanics

As the pastor/ethnographer does his work of learning about the culture of the target audience, the various features of the culture with which he wants to share the gospel will become evident. From his observations he has decided how he will contextualize the gospel message in terms of the target culture. He also will have studied his own culture thoroughly so as to not inject any of his own cultural dispositions into his message inadvertently. He has made contact with people of that culture, becoming an active participant in their culture and learning from them. He now needs an "entry point," through which he can bring the Good News of salvation in Christ to the people. These will vary from culture to culture, but in Hispanic culture, one entry point in particular, stands out: the family. If, in the process of learning about the target culture, the missionary should become an accepted member of an Hispanic extended family, he has his best opportunity for outreach partially attained. For many Hispanics, relationships are key, and being accepted into an extended family of Hispanics, brings the missionary into a relationship with the family that is contained in the basic structure of their society. As the missionary becomes more and more familiar to and accepted into the extended family, he may earn the right to speak of religion. Then it is time to bring the gospel to the family. Salomón suggests a home Bible study method:

The ideal method of evangelism for reaching out to the Mexican community and growing a Hispanic congregation is through a series of home Bible studies that employ the extended web of kinship relationships to gain entrance into the home and assist in establishing the trust necessary for the Hispanic to assimilate the message presented. **xxxiv**

A Biblical example of this method might be Peter at the home of Cornelius in Acts, chapter ten: or Paul and Silas in the house of the jailer in Philippi. Paul and Silas said to him, "Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved—you and your household (Acts 16:31)." Hesselgrave points out that this verse "does not mean that one believer can believe for another person. Rather, the promise indicates that within kinship relationships there are favorable circumstances for evangelism." This statement holds true especially among family-oriented groups such as Hispanics, who tend to distrust strangers and place their highest trust in members of their own (extended) family. Even if he can connect with just one member of an extended family, that person can serve as a link to the rest of the members of his family. Once a missionary is an "honorary member" of this family he may gain an audience for the true gospel. They will not be

any more receptive but they will be present to listen. In addition, he may get such an opportunity on many occasions as the extended family gathers to celebrate Baptisms, confirmations, weddings, and *quinceañeras* (similar to a sweet sixteen party). These events "can be excellent opportunities for teaching a wider audience the significance of the events and for preaching the Word of God to the extended members of a particular family." "xxxvi"

Once he has gained an audience within the family, he has a certain advantage in that Hispanics are familiar with Christianity—a powerful entry point. The challenge is teaching them the real significance of the symbols they have learned and explaining the central doctrines of the Bible to them, which have been obscured by the Roman Catholic Church. There are, of course, other possible entry points into Hispanic culture, but they cannot be fully covered here.

Cross-cultural ministry and communication is much more complex than a fourteen page paper can express, and at times may seem difficult and very time-consuming. However, the time that is "lost" in preparing for and carrying out these steps may be used by the Holy Spirit to harvest a large number of souls from a particular ethnic group. They may have never known the love of God in Christ if some faithful pastor had not taken the time to learn about their culture and bring them the gospel in a way that they could understand. May the Lord of the Church bless our efforts in his name as we "make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19 NIV); and may we never neglect the "nations" that may be living in our own cities and neighborhoods.

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^v Hesselgrave, 176.

^{vi} Salomón, Esaúl and Melissa. *Harvest Waiting: Reaching out to the Mexicans*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1995: 17.

vii Ibid., 24.

viii Hesselgrave, Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally., 100.

^{ix} Ibid., 115.

^x Hesselgrave, Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally., 119.

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xii Hesselgrave, Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally., 125.

xiii Ibid., 126.

xiv Nida, 100.

xv Hiebert, Paul G. *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985: 11.

^{xvi} Hiebert, 113-137.

^{xvii} Salomón, 6.

xviii Ibid., 9.

xix Salomón, 10.

xx Lucas, 55.

xxi Salomón, 24.

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xxii Kane, Herbert J. Wanted: World Christians. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1986: 103-
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xxiii Salomón, 30.

^{xxiv} Salomón, 15.

xxv Ibid., 11.

xxvi Ibid., 19.

xxvii Kane, 121.

xxviii Salomón, 12.

xxix Nida, 100.

xxx Hesselgrave, Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally., 184.

xxxii Hesselgrave, Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally., 209.
xxxii Hesselgrave, Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally., 109.
xxxiii Hesselgrave, Planting Churches Cross-Culturally., 225.

xxxiv Salomón, 30.

Hesselgrave, *Planting Churches Cross-Culturally.*, 176.

xxxvi Salomón, 23.

xxxvii Ibid., 23.