

Cross Cultural Ministry – Don't Lose The Message

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We are all familiar with the astonishing statistics. Nearly 12 percent of the current US population is foreign born – more than one out of every ten people! Everybody wants to come to the United States, it seems. Immigrants arrive daily from Mexico, from Central America, from South America, and the Caribbean. They come from Europe, from Asia, and from Africa. The world is beating a path to our door.

The practical implications for WELS have been enormous. At one time we might have neatly categorized our outreach efforts into home missions and world missions. Home missionaries could expect to concentrate almost exclusively on trying to evangelize unchurched people who were, culturally speaking, very much like themselves. Preaching and teaching would be done in English. World missionaries had the more exotic assignments of immersing themselves in another language and culture. Now the lines between home and world mission assignments are becoming increasingly blurry. To my knowledge we have home mission efforts being carried out in Spanish, Hmong, Chinese, and Vietnamese. In other words, a considerable amount of world mission work is being done right here at home.

Now we may recognize the opportunities that lie before us, but as the title to this paper suggests, we also have our fears and concerns. We're a little bit worried that as we reach out to others, we might lose ourselves. We're a little bit concerned that as we leap across linguistic and cultural barriers to evangelize, we might lose some of our doctrinal integrity along the way. Perhaps we've grown a little bit weary of people who quote Paul's "all things to all people" statement to justify what appears to us to be a kind of "anything goes" approach to outreach.

Personally, I can never refer to that "all things to all people" passage without thinking of my friend Jerry. Jerry was a former evangelical Christian who had found a religious home in Islam. He liked the fact that Islam was a universal religion believing in one God. Most of all he liked it because it had laws. One of the things that had frustrated him about his former Christian friends was, as he put it, "They all talked about the Spirit and love. But if you asked, 'What does love mean?' you found out it meant whatever the guy wanted it to at the time. Now in Islam, we know what we're supposed to do. You Christians, you don't know. You just have this vague, impossible, meaningless word."

Not surprisingly, Jerry hated the Apostle Paul. When he heard me quote the "all things to all men" passage, he'd say, "Tsk, tsk, tsk. You see! The man had no integrity. No law. Just 'love.' That's why he was so bendable. He became whatever people wanted him to be, and would say whatever people wanted him to say. The man was a chameleon."

Clearly Jerry was wrong about Paul. But what about us? Can we lose the message if we overdo the "all things to all people" bit? There is a danger, certainly. Some things can get lost in translation. Worse, there have always been those who have deliberately polluted the pure gospel with the teachings, the philosophies, and the cultures of men.

But I wonder if cross cultural work need be as great a danger as some may fear. Fears can easily become excuses for not being as vigorous in our efforts as the Lord would have us be. Rather than lose anything, most people and congregations familiar with cross cultural outreach say that, for them, cross cultural work has been one of the most rewarding experiences of their lives. Yes, it is humbling, even chastening. Every calling comes with cross. But cross also "produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it" (Heb 12:11). Since that's God's promise, we can count on it!

Theological Basis for Cross Cultural Work

Why do cross cultural work?

In fact, rather than being an occasion for us to lose who we are in Christ, I believe cross cultural work is a

normal expression of the mind of Christ, the mind Christ has given us in the gospel. Not to respond to cross cultural opportunities would be to stifle within us the restless love of Christ, the love of which Paul spoke when he wrote, "For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all. and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who love should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again" (2 Co 5:14-15).

A heart, that lives by the spiritual freedom found in Christ's love for sinners has realized something very basic about culture: "It took a love without limit to reach me. And because that love is unbounded, I can only erect human barriers to it at the cost of grieving the Spirit of Christ within me." Only in that realization do the following words make sense:

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 Co 9:19-23).

What matters is not my own cultural preferences, nor even my group's cultural preferences. Love lets the neighbors' need set the context for communicating the gospel. And the neighbor here is not the one 'inside' my group. He's the one who's not yet become a Christian. If he needs me to be a Jew to him, I will be a Jew. If he needs me to observe his scruples so that he remains at ease, that's fine with me. "For in Christ Jesus what matters is not whether you're a Jew or a Gentile; what matters is faith working in love" (Ga 5:6).

This is not to say Paul was some kind of moral chameleon. What Paul did reject was the thought of allowing God's law to be the compelling power in the lives of God's people. What Paul would not allow was for a righteousness won by law to trump God's grace in Christ as the way to salvation. But Paul clearly believed that God had an unchanging moral will for all people, a moral sense that was written on their hearts and to which he would hold them accountable (see Romans 1 and 2). Nor was Paul himself "free from the law" in the sense that he saw the sanctified life on earth as possible without any moral direction. As he says, he was "under Christ's law" or, more literally, "in Christ's law" (1 Co 9:2 1).

This means, of course, that Paul would meditate on God's Torah "day and night" as all godly people do. He would use God's law to expose the false thoughts and lies of his sinful self, in which he had no confidence at all. But even more than this the passage means that Paul had the Spirit of Christ, the mind of Christ, Christ himself living in him through the gospel (see 1 Co 2:16). And Christ – in all his integrity – would be a fruitful being in him. His Spirit would prompt him by his love, reminding him of how our Lord:

being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be grasped,
but made himself nothing,
taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a man,
He humbled himself
and became obedient to death –
even death on a cross! (Php 2:6-8).

We might paraphrase Paul's thinking on cross cultural ministry something like this: "Jesus did not shrink back from entering a world made alien to him by sin. Nor did he shun a slave's death on the cross to serve me in my need. His love drove him on for me. Since this is so, the one consideration above all that will guide me is the thought: I am not here to be served, but to offer my life in service to others. Whatever my neighbors' need, that I will do." As Paul urged Christians in another place, "Bear one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ" (Ga 6:2). There is no greater wholeness, no greater integrity, to be found on

earth than that.

In other words, proper motivation is key. Merely quoting immigration statistics won't inspire any one of us here, nor will it energize our congregations. Simply reaching out to our neighbors because it is a synod priority, or because we're running out of "our kind of people" (whatever that means), or because it's a cool and trendy thing to do is a similar waste of time. Before we go out into all the world, at the door we need to check our heart.

If we are not driven on by Christ's love – Christ's love for us – we are bound to fail. If we are not convinced that he died for all, our outreach efforts will similarly lack conviction and the message will be lost. If, without a servant's heart, we don't realize that those who live no longer live for themselves, our cross cultural missions will become monuments to our own pride. That is to say, we will be more concerned about making other people cultural clones of ourselves than about bringing them the good news of Jesus.

That's why if we are aiming to engage in cross cultural outreach as a congregation, it is simply essential to make sure that the congregation as a whole sees it as their gospel mission. It cannot be the hobby of a few – even if only a few at first may be engaged in it. It needs to be perceived as what we together are doing – some directly, others in supporting roles – because the Lord loved us and gave himself for us. When, through specific law and gospel, the congregation is united around the "why" question, questions of what we are to do and how we are to do it become a lot easier to answer.

A good place to start if you are interested in assessing your own congregation's readiness to reach out into your own neighborhood would be to consult Prof. E. Allen Sorum's book *Change: Mission and Ministry Across Cultures*. Note especially chapter four "A Diagnostic Study of Your Congregation."¹

What Do We Share Across Cultures?

Now while we don't want to add to the gospel by insisting on our own cultural preferences, we don't want to dilute the gospel either, moved perhaps by some misguided notion that truth somehow becomes expendable when we move from one culture to another. We remember that our Savior urged us to teach all nations to hold fast to "everything I have commanded you" (Mt 18:20). We note that the great Apostle to the Gentiles could unashamedly say, "I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God" (Acts 20:27).

In this respect God has blessed us in WELS with what I consider to be a unique grasp on some extremely important aspects of that "whole will of God." I say this not because I want us to glory in ourselves. We are jars of clay. Yet we can boast in the Lord because, purely by his grace, he has placed among us and in us these treasures. It also goes without saying that any grace we have received is grace for us to share. As I list them, I will note how each one of these unique blessings has implications for cross cultural outreach.

Among us Scripture reigns supreme. To find out what our God has to say to us, we go back to the Scriptures. They alone are inspired by God. They alone are without error. They alone are the "pure, clear fountain of Israel...the one true standard by which all teachers and doctrines are to be judged and evaluated" (FC-SD, Preface).

First of all this means that, because we have the sure, prophetic Word, we have a unique authority to teach and preach no matter where we are. Any cross cultural worker is bound to be tempted at some time or other into wondering, "What am I doing here? What right do I have to say these things to these people?" That's when he needs to remember Jesus' words, "Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth" (John 17:17) and "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you" (John 21:10).

This also means that for us Scriptures reign supreme over every merely human tradition, custom, or writing. From the Scriptures we are certain about what we know with the full certainty of faith. By means of the Scripture's truth "we demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ" (2 Co 10:5). We will not allow any tradition or custom – whether of our own culture or of someone else's – to call into question or contradict a single clear word of Scripture.

¹ Available from NPH at <http://online.nph.net/cgi-bin/site.pl?10418&productID=387884>.

From the Scriptures we also learn not to speak with authority on those things that the Scripture has not clearly revealed. As Paul urged the Corinthians, "Do not go beyond what is written" (1 Co 4:6). That means that if the Scriptures make it clear that a truth is meant for all people of all times, we will have no hesitation in proclaiming it as part of the whole counsel of God. But if the Scriptures make it clear that a truth is directed to a particular people living at a particular time, we do not treat it as a universal truth. Finally when the Scriptures are silent, we must remain silent too.

One of the truly rewarding things about cross cultural outreach is the way that learning about another culture can help you understand some scriptural truths more fully. Certain doctrines seem to resonate more powerfully within some cultures than they do in others. Africa taught me a greater appreciation, for example, of what it means for a group of people to be one in Christ. It also helped me appreciate Jesus' words about not worrying about what we were going to eat or drink, or how we would be clothed. He was speaking to people who were much like the Africans I knew, people who lived much closer to the edge of poverty than anything I had ever seen or experienced in the West.

In engaging in cross cultural ministry a person will also learn that applications of God's word need not be everywhere the same. If he is attentive to the culture he is trying to reach while diligently searching the Scriptures, he will learn better how to distinguish a pure scriptural truth from its applications. As he works in partnership with the people he is trying to reach, he will learn how that same scriptural truth applies in this somewhat different context.

Marriage arrangements, for example, often differ from culture to culture. I might get excited in Hopkins, Michigan, if two people in my congregation were living together without a legally contracted marriage, duly licensed by the state. But I could be fairly tranquil with the same situation in Mwembezhi, Zambia, since most marriages there occur under traditional law, without benefit of any legal marriage license. But while its applications may differ from culture to culture, the biblical truth we are applying remains the same.

We are the church of the unconditional gospel, the pure gospel, the gospel with no strings attached (objective justification). The pure gospel states: "God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them" (2 Co 5:19). In other words, we believe that Christ died not for the pretty good, for those who mostly have their act together, for those who are like us, for the lovely, the lovable and the deserving, but for sinners! A whole world of sinners – like you and like me.

Obviously keeping the gospel pure also means carefully distinguishing law and gospel since, no matter what the culture, properly proclaiming both law and gospel remains God's only way of saving people.

Since the cross cultural implications of this precious truth were discussed above, we have no need to repeat that whole discussion here. The one thing I might add is simply this: the unconditional gospel is both the ground of our being and our reason for existence whether we live in Lake Mills or Salt Lake City, Lilongwe or Lincoln, Beijing or Beatrice. Why do I mention this? Because holding on tightly to his grace-given identity as an unconditional gospel-preaching Lutheran is essential for the spiritual comfort of every WELS cross cultural worker. It fills him with a unique sense of purpose no matter what culture he is trying to reach.

There were, for example, many other Christian denominations at work in trying to reach the Mormons in Salt Lake, most of which had been there a long time before any WELS Lutherans came to town. But I never felt myself to be competing with them. And, while I was always glad to learn from their experience, I never felt that I had to slavishly imitate them. Why not? Because I had something unique to share! I had the unconditional gospel to proclaim – pure grace with no if's, and's or but's, the same grace by which I lived.

We are a "means of grace" church. That means that we confess the scriptural truth that the Spirit does his saving work in us through the gospel in Word *and* in Sacrament. Since we've said enough already about the power of the gospel proclamation, we should probably say a little about the gospel as it comes to us through the sacraments.

We know that the gospel creates its own forms. There are no New Testament ceremonial laws. We are free to arrange many things in the church as seems best to us. We do not, for example, attach our hopes to any particular form of church government, nor do we imagine that there is only one divinely-instituted outward form of public ministry

that must always, everywhere be the same. There is no one divinely-prescribed order of worship.

But the Lord's Supper and baptism are sacred actions instituted by Christ. When God promises to make us his own through the "washing with water through the Word" (Eph 5:26), we cannot substitute another ritual or ceremony to replace it. And when our Lord invites us to eat and drink his body and blood under bread and wine, we are not free to alter his invitation and do something else instead.

It is obvious that reaching out to other cultures will involve different forms of worship. We are certainly free to adapt and change worship forms. But we are not free to change them in such a way that the gospel in Word and Sacrament ceases to be worship's beating heart. We are not free to demote the gospel from the central role in worship to some kind of supporting role. We are not free to act as if baptism or the Lord's Supper were less important channels for the gospel than the proclaimed Word. If someone tampers with either the Supper or baptism, he is tampering with the gospel.

Finally, we are a confessional church. We are a church which believes that doctrine matters, that doctrine is life, and that false doctrine destroys life. We believe in the "profound seriousness of truth," as Sasse once put it. That's why we are a church that freely binds itself to the Lutheran Confessions. They express what the Scriptures have to say with respect to every doctrine they affirm. They also speak an authoritative and scriptural "no" to false teachings that rob Christ of his glory.

Some might question the relevance of sharing the Confessions across cultures. Yet it is pure romanticism to believe that other cultures cannot and will not be infected by the same false doctrines that have plagued the church in prior ages. True enough, Satan does adjust his tactics from culture to culture. But when we take the long view through history, we discover that all his tricks are merely variations on familiar themes.

Add to this the fact that the Confessions are really all about the gospel. The confessors' chief concern – whether in thesis or in antithesis – was to keep the gospel pure. If the Confessions no longer seem relevant to us, one has to ask whether our love for the pure gospel has grown cold.

So the better question to ask is, "Why ever would you *not* want to share this rich treasury of grace with others?"

In a sense what we are talking about here is our identity as Lutherans. Are there some other things you might want to add to this list?

To sum up this first section, we could simply say: when you know who Jesus is and why he came, then you know who you are and why you're here. Peter's confession of Jesus is as clear as it can be, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matt 16:16). Jesus' description of his mission is equally clear, "The Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost" (Luke 19:10). Since Christ loved us and gave himself for us, we are God's children by faith in him. As one who found us when we were lost, he in turn commissions us, "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you" (John 20:21).

Practical considerations for cross cultural work

Understanding culture

A matter of communication

When I think about culture and cross cultural ministry, I tend to approach it first as an issue of communication. In other words, I like to zero in on the question: how do I communicate as clearly as I can to this new culture "the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints" (Jude 3)? Undoubtedly there are many other important questions to consider and think through, but this to me seems as good a place as any to start.

To illustrate the importance of this issue, let me tell you two stories. When I first arrived in what was then Northern Rhodesia, my father took me to the local school and enrolled me in standard 2A (fourth grade, by our reckoning). In my first class on my first day, the teacher said, "Alright, students, take out your copybooks. We are going to have a mental arithmetic test. First question: what is £3 17s. 9d plus £7 4s. 3d.?"

Now I really had no idea how pounds, shillings, and pence worked. I knew it was money, and I assumed it worked something like dollars and cents, but I wasn't sure about the differences. There were rules to

this game that everyone else understood but me. A pretty helpless feeling. Pounds, shillings, and pence were no match to the purely decimal dollars and cents. I think I managed to scrawl the symbol for an English pound correctly, but that was the only thing I got right. At the end of my first day, the teacher handed my test back with a big fat "F" on top. Nothing lost in translation there.

Later, as a skinny, awkward 14 year old, I returned to the United States to go to Northwestern Prep. I remember how shocked and amazed I was to witness my first pep rally. What were those girls doing – they called themselves cheerleaders – leaping up and down and showing their legs? Why was the coach saying all those ridiculous things? Why were all the prep students filling the gymnasium with these thunderous outcries of joy, these paroxysms of pleasure? It all seemed so silly and artificial.

Now as you listened to those stories, what were you thinking? For instance, what did you think of that teacher's ability to relate to her students? Or what about my reaction to the pep rally? In my harsh judgments was I really being fair to the cheerleaders? To the coach? To my fellow students?

What I'm trying to illustrate is something basic in communication. We all have our own background and experiences. The country of our birth, our social background, the shared wisdom and experience of our "tribe," our language, the stories our mother told us, the type of obedience our father expected of us – all of these things shaped the way we see life. For now let's use the word "culture" to describe them. Much of what we see and hear we evaluate against the grid of culture – our own background and experiences. Much of what we see and hear in people from another culture we may simply not understand, or be oblivious to, because we do not share the assumptions of the culture in which they were brought up.

But is that where we have to leave it? Isn't it possible for us to learn about others so that we can understand them better? And isn't it possible for us to learn about how we appear to others so that we might better realize what some of the stumbling blocks are that impede a freer and easier understanding between us? Can we not, as we interact with people of other backgrounds and cultures, both come to know them better as well as better understand ourselves?

I'm sure of it. That teacher giving me the mental arithmetic test, for example, might have empathized with me on the basis of our common humanity. She might have reflected upon the fact that this was my first day and that I was most definitely a stranger in a strange land. She might have shown me some consideration. That she did not was more than just a failure caused by cultural perspective. It was a "sin of omission."

Similarly, my sinful harshness in judging the behavior of the girls, the coach, and the crowd might have been tempered by an understanding I only came to acquire later: that it is best when encountering a new culture to suspend judgment at first, not to be too hasty in one's conclusions. A person really has to get to know a group of people on their own terms before he will be able to understand their true strengths and weaknesses.

This, of course, is the way of love and a truly empathetic love that seeks the good of one's neighbor is not to be found on earth. That is to say, it doesn't exist by nature in any one of Adam's children. Only the gospel can give it to us, just as only the gospel can give us a God's eye view of everything.

In order to grow in our ability to engage in loving, intercultural communication, it might help to define more carefully what we mean by culture.

Defining Culture

Defining the word "culture" is almost a cottage industry. Every sociologist and anthropologist, it seems, likes to generate their own definition. I like the following one because of its simplicity: *culture is a shared system of behavior, values, and beliefs*. Notice first of all that culture is something shared by a group. We generally don't speak of individuals each having their own culture. Secondly, notice that the definition zeroes in on three aspects of culture ranging from that which we can observe (behavior) to matters we can only learn about through careful listening (beliefs).

Closely related to modern concepts of culture is the notion of "worldview." If culture includes shared beliefs, the deepest of those beliefs would be considered a culture's worldview. *Worldview*, in other

words, *is a culture's set of fundamental assumptions about the way things are.*

For example sophisticated Westerners tend to view the world through a scientific "lens." This lens screens out visions of demons, angels, or spirits of any kind. They are convinced by scientific explanations, such as those offered on the nightly news when their local "weather-team" draws all those little circles and arrows in the air. Compare them with a subsistence farmer from Central Africa. He views himself as living in a world where the veil dividing the realm of the physical from the realm of spirits is gossamer-thin. So convinced is he that God sends the rain that he can even say (in a striking metaphor) "*Leza ulawa! God is falling!*" when he sees the storm approaching.

Not only does worldview shape the way we see the world, it can also have an effect on the raw data coming into us, altering its meaning in some cases, filtering it out altogether in others. A Mormon reads the word "Savior" in the sentence, "Jesus is our Savior," and because of deeply-held beliefs he connects Jesus' saving work with his making it possible for us to rise from the dead on the Last Day. He does not connect it with God's absolution of the world's sin and the promise of eternal life in our Father's presence. Life in God's presence is still something (as he sees it) that we must achieve for ourselves. Even though he reads his Bible, and even though the Bible connects Jesus' work with the forgiveness of sins, he will either reinterpret those statements in such a way as to make them fit in with what he already believes, or he will filter them out altogether as essentially meaningless.²

Another example of this same thing would be a rural African mother being told by the dispensary nursing sister that her child died of the measles. She believes the nurse well enough, so far as it goes. But she also believes that the measles must have been sent by some witch, or by an offended ancestor who does not like the child's name. As one African put it when told that a mosquito bite had caused his malaria, "Yes, but who sent that mosquito!?"

Needless to say, it is far from easy for an outsider to come to an understanding of another culture's worldview. Often these worldview assumptions are so deeply embedded that those within the culture are not even aware of them. Those assumptions and beliefs for them are simply "the way things are." In addition, people from other cultures may find it difficult to articulate to us reasons why they do certain things. Once, for example, I asked why a group of men at a funeral were walking in a ragged line while occasionally thrusting spears into the air (something they called *kuzawela*). The man I asked simply shrugged his shoulders and said, "*N'ciyanza cesu*", "It is our custom."

For Further Thought

Are there deeply held beliefs that form part of the worldview of all cultures? If so, which would they be?

Tuning into culture

Now as I said, the man who shrugged me off might have simply been unable to explain the funeral custom. If someone asked me to explain some of our funeral customs, I might have a similar problem. On the other hand, he might have been hesitant to share an explanation with a stranger, fearing perhaps I might laugh at it or criticize it.

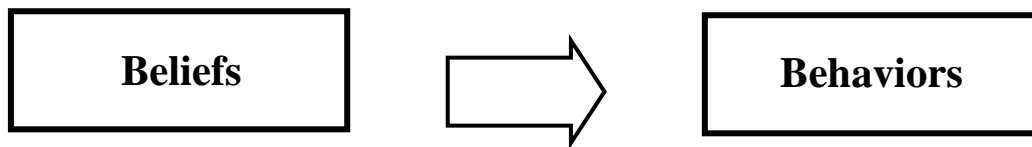
What all this points to is the necessity of building relationships in cross cultural work. The longer I am with a group of people, the more I will begin to absorb some of the implicit meanings of their cultural behaviors. They'll just start to rub off on me. What's more, the longer I am with a group of people and show a genuine, loving interest in them, the more they'll open up to me as they come to trust me.

Since relationship building is so important, we'll have to talk more about it later. Right now let's consider some basic listening and observing skills that will help us tune into other cultures.

² Mark Cares' *Speaking the Truth in Love to Mormons* contains many more examples of the way meanings of common biblical words have shifted among the Latter-Day Saints in its 'Dictionary of Mormonese.' The entire book, in fact, is a good, concrete example of how to tune into another culture's worldview. It is available from Amazon at the following url: <http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/1893702065/002-7205306-0314443?v=glance&n=283155>.

The fundamentals

Let's begin with this fundamental thought:



If we can agree that people act on what they believe to be true, it naturally follows that we can come to an understanding of their beliefs by a close observation of their behaviors. Here I am using behaviors in a very broad sense to include both *what people say* and *what they do*. What are their greeting practices, for example, or what significance is there in this culture when a person folds his arms?

Analyzing behaviors includes taking a close look at the *material culture* of a people, and the *symbols* that they use. Observing their material culture means asking questions such as how their houses are built, or what their staple food might be. Symbols are signs that have acquired a conventionalized significance. When, in our culture, we see a person with a bright metallic badge in his lapel pocket, what does that mean? If a Tonga man or an Apache woman sees an owl, what significance does that animal hold for them?

Finally, any close observation of behaviors includes looking at a culture's *institutions and customary practices*. What form of government do these people have? How do they organize themselves? How are community decisions arrived at and how are laws enforced? Why do women draw water from the well and not men? Why do men break the first ground in plowing and not women? Why do the men wash their hands at a graveside? Why do these people put trees in their houses and decorate them every December?

For Further Thought

1. Evaluate these common American expressions for what they reveal about our worldview:
 - a. "spend time"
 - b. "waste time"
 - c. "time is money"
2. What kinds of symbols are seen in our TV commercials? What do they reveal about our culture?

A further breakdown of basic areas to consider

1. A people's *history* and *accumulated wisdom*. What are the *stories* the people tell of themselves and others? What are their myths about how the world came to be and how they as a people came to be? What kind of stories do parents tell their children? What kind of *proverbs* do they have? What do all of these things say about their basic beliefs?
2. What are their *religious* beliefs? As Luther puts it in his Large Catechism, "There has never been a nation so wicked that it did not establish and maintain some sort of worship." Who is God? How do I/we relate to him? Is there life after death? A broader way of thinking about this might be to say, "How do they define THE PROBLEM and what is their SOLUTION?" Every group has some sense that the world has gone wrong. Every group deals with the problem of pain. But they often differ in how they define it. Many African societies, for example, define the problem in terms of witches and witchcraft. Many secular Americans see the problem as being how to achieve material success and sustain it. A devout Buddhist wants to achieve freedom from the chains of desire.

3. Closely related to the above are common *worship rituals*: how do they observe rites of passage (birth, puberty, marriage, death)? What holidays are sacred to them and how do they observe them? By observing these things we can get a better sense of what a culture's *practical* (i.e., day to day) religion is.
4. How is the *family* defined? Do they think in terms of a nuclear family as we tend to do, or are they more accustomed to thinking about the family more broadly and extensively? How are the relationships among the members of the family viewed? How are wives to relate to husbands? Husbands to wives? Brothers to sisters? Men to women? Boys to girls? Youth to age? Age to youth? What kinds of friendship are normal and expected? What other kinds of sub-groupings are there? What kind of respect is demanded for ancestors?
5. What are the *traditional occupations* among this ethnic group? Who does what sort of work?
6. How do people *communicate*? Are they direct, saying exactly what they mean, or are they more indirect, suggesting and implying what they mean? Are messages explicitly and fully spelled out to the intended hearers, or is there a great deal of communication going on implicitly through non-verbal cues or the telling of stories? How important is maintaining one's "face" in public? Is this group more task and time oriented or more relationally and event oriented? In other words, are personal relationships just as important as getting the job done, or is getting the job done paramount?
7. Since we have in mind reaching out to other cultures living in America, we will want to ask about *their experiences as immigrants*. Why did they come to America? What tensions do they experience as they try to cope with the dominant American values? How are they adjusting? What are the greatest challenges or problems that they face? Are they trying to preserve their original culture, or are they eager to adapt to American life? How much contact is there still with their original homeland? In his book *Change: Mission and Ministry Across Cultures*, Prof. E. Allen Sorum dedicates an entire chapter (six) to this sort of interview, with many helpful suggestions on how this kind of interview can become a mission plan. The leadership of any congregation desiring to do cross cultural outreach would do well to read this book carefully and implement its suggestions.

Listening to Understand, Not to Argue or to Judge

As I was trying to illustrate with my "pep rally" example earlier, if we sincerely desire to follow the way of love in learning about another culture, we have to keep the purpose of our observation in the forefront of our minds. It's easy to come to snap judgments about others. It's easy to dismiss others as misguided, foolish, and wrong-headed because they don't do things the way we would do them. But if we really want people to open up to us, we need to learn how to suspend judgment. Our goal in these observations and conversations is first of all to understand who these people are so that we may better communicate the unchanging Word with them. Communication can only happen if you meet people where they are at, not where you think they ought to be.

Ethnocentrism

But from experience I know that this is not always so easy. And this is not simply because when two cultures come into contact, there's bound to be misunderstandings. There is also the problem of what anthropologists call "ethnocentrism," a problem I would prefer to call a sinful lack of love.

Ethnocentrism is the assumption that our ways are always better. Our ways are always right. Our comfort is what matters most. Our "rights" are the most significant. It's the exact opposite of the kind of servant-love we see in Paul. It comes, of course, from that self-centered, ego-driven sinful nature that each one of us inherited from Adam. Luther was describing it when he wrote, "*Homo incurvatus in se est.*" "Human beings are turned in upon themselves." And what is true of individual human beings is also true of groups of human beings. The natural tendency is to put our own group before others, rather than seek the interests of the aliens and strangers among us.

I've experienced this attitude many times in my ministry – and I don't have to look any further than myself to find it. Why is it, for example, that my first sense of living in Salt Lake City was of how weird these Mormons were, and how stupid they must be to believe some of the things they did? I'd like to pretend, of course, that those thoughts never occurred to me. I am ashamed of them. But I have to own up to them. I can also remember how many times an evangelism call degenerated into an intellectual discussion over who was right and who was wrong, with the result that no one heard the gospel or was won for Christ.

WELS Aloofness

An ethnocentric attitude is observable among us, I believe, in more subtle ways as well. We WELSians have a tendency to hold ourselves aloof from others.³ Some of it may come from a self-satisfied lack of curiosity about other cultures. Some of it may simply stem from a fear of offending. At MLC, for instance, one African American student put it this way, "The other students are afraid to offend us, so they don't say anything. Or they just avoid people who are different."⁴ But whether it stems from indifference or a misguided fear, the result is the same. No contact is made with the other cultures among us. Sometimes I think of it as a failure of the imagination, an inability or perhaps even an unwillingness to put yourself into the shoes of someone different, to imagine his possibilities as if they were your own.

This same sort of thing happens in our congregational life as well. It's not so much what we do; it's what we *don't* do. Obviously, we won't even start understanding other cultures if we don't make contact with them, or open ourselves up to them.

How does this aloofness demonstrate itself? We're comfortable in our congregations the way things are. We tend to avoid getting ourselves into the difficulties involved in new and unfamiliar situations, the whole messiness of love. We steer clear of conversations with strangers where there might be a real exchange of views, and where we can't control the outcome. If we do find ourselves talking with a non-WELSian, we want to make sure they know who we are first, and so we'll try to tell them as much as we can about our doctrine and history. Instead of listening and learning about *them*, we're more concerned with them knowing about us.

As we look out on our localities, we often don't see the changing face of the neighborhood. We're slow to recognize the spiritual needs of the immigrants among us – the Hispanics, the Hmong, the Chinese, the Koreans. If someone of a different culture wanders into our church, we are sometimes less worried about how he might feel than about how uncomfortable we feel.⁵

These are generalizations, of course, and may not be applicable to your own particular congregation or situation. But the larger truth here remains: just as Christians have a self-centered sin-nature that sees things in terms of "me, myself, and I," so do Christian congregations. We can expect, therefore, to find evidence of these loveless ways among us whenever we seek to reach out to other cultures.

We must recognize sin when we find it in ourselves, and repent of it as sin. Because of our sinful nature, we will find cross cultural work to be a struggle at times. Because of sin, it won't be easy to accommodate ourselves so as to reach other people where they are at. Because of sin, it won't be easy to open ourselves up to someone else's way of seeing things, and listen with an eagerness to understand. Because of sin, it won't be easy to suspend judgment for awhile as we learn about people from different backgrounds and cultures.

Again, not only is it hard for us, it's impossible. As we examine ourselves and then look at the love of Christ, how can we not be struck dumb with sorrow at how far from him we still wander, at how little our love – after all this time – has come to resemble his? Yet to whom can we poor sinners go for relief? We have no one else to cling to who can speak to our hearts those matchless words of love and forgiveness. When we see how far his love was willing to go for us, we are renewed again in his pardon and are resolved

³ Some might try to justify this by citing the doctrine of fellowship. But a full-orbed doctrine of fellowship seeks vigorously to practice fellowship with the searching, the weak in faith, the uncertain, and the troubled.

⁴ Interview taken on April 23, 1998.

⁵ In 1997, the Seeking Our Neighbor (SON) Committee made its official report to the Synod after it had conducted extensive interviews among foreign and minority members of our churches. Many of these remarks are simply paraphrases of their findings.

once more to be for others what he has been for us.

No Bottom Line?

Naturally when I speak about suspending judgment, I don't mean permanently. I do not advocate a long term policy of ignoring cultural differences that arise from false beliefs and that keep people enslaved to sin. Nor am I suggesting we can safely set aside the call to repent because we are now so enlightened that we understand the deep theological truth, "Different strokes for different folks."

But I do mean it is important not to be too hasty in our judgments and applications of God's law as cultural outsiders. I do mean to emphasize how important it is to tune in first to other cultures so that we truly understand what we are talking about when the time comes to preach specific law. Even more, I do mean to say we need to understand people in this new culture so that we can preach specific gospel to just those hurts, fears, troubles, and sins that are plaguing them.

And since such things are more easily discerned by Christians who are cultural insiders rather than those who are cultural outsiders, we come back to the importance of building relationships. In fact one of the real joys of intercultural work is the partnership in the gospel that it brings, enriching not only those who receive the gospel, but also those who bring the gospel.

Building relationships

Whatever the strategy, be real

When I was in Salt Lake City, I ran across an LDS brochure that spoke to their church members about "Friendshipping.". It struck me because I discovered it about the same time as people among us were beginning to talk about "friendship evangelism." As one might expect, the Mormons were very methodical and organized about it. They had a strategy.

The goal was to get missionaries into the house of one's newly moved-in neighbor. To achieve that goal, Mormons were urged to bring suppers over to their new neighbors, to offer to watch the children while the parents unpacked, to guide them around to the local bank, grocery, library, etc. As the relationship grew, they were to build on it by getting the missionaries over to their neighbors to make a call. It was a good strategy; it made good sense.

I got a chance to hear from some of my own prospects how the strategy would work out in practice, however. It was all potluck and barbeques and friendship so long as the new neighbors were open to hearing about Mormonism. But the moment they made it clear they weren't interested, the suppers and offers of help stopped. No more friendship for you!

To me the moral of the story is this: if we are going to build relationships, especially with people of other cultures, we need to be real. I think it makes perfect sense to have an outreach strategy. As we tune into the people of other cultures and listen to their stories, we are going to become more and more aware of recurring themes. We're going to learn where their needs are, what their hopes are, what their problems are. And when we discover what those hopes, needs, and problems are, we may well develop an outreach strategy around them – starting ESL classes, for example, or a daycare, or a preschool.

But we can't look at those relationships as some kind of *quid pro quo*, "Okay, I'll teach you English but only if you take these Bible classes, too. If you won't, forget about it." Naturally, we want to share with our new friends the truth that gives us strength and joy with each new day. But we must be prepared for the fact that some may never get it. And that thought may hurt. Yet we can't stop caring or offering help. If love becomes manipulative, it isn't love.

Learn the language

Except in cases where it's clear that the immigrants prefer English even at home, I think it's vital that leaders in

the congregational cross cultural effort acquire some kind of ability in the language. It's extremely difficult, in my view, to understand a culture apart from a knowledge of its language. Even if you feel like you can only babble like a two year old, your attempt to learn how they speak sends a clear and unmistakable message of love and humility. Not only that, it levels the playing field, so to speak. As you plan to bring them gifts from your understanding – chief of which, of course, is the gospel – they can bring you gifts from their understanding – that is: an ability to speak their language and a richer understanding of their culture.

Speak in Context

I've been out of the parish for a long time now. And do you know what? It's become a lot harder for me to preach. The Word is the same, and in fact, I probably have more time to study the Word than do most busy pastors, but I just find it a lot harder to write and deliver sermons. The reason why isn't hard to figure out. I'm no longer a shepherd of the congregation that I preach to. I'm not involved in their lives. I don't have a chance to hear their hopes, their dreams, their sorrows or their fears. I don't have direct experience of how sin lays them low. I don't have a chance to see their shining acts of love. Every pastor knows that it's easier to preach to a congregation of people you know.

When you read our cross cultural ministry publications and hear the writers speak about "contextualizing" the message, this is what they mean. Just as every good parish pastor knows his people and points his message in such a way that the unchanging Word is directed towards their particular needs, so in cross cultural work we will take care that we preach the unchanging Word in a way that is relevant to that culture's particular concerns. Love lets the neighbors' need set the context for communicating the gospel.

Scripture itself is filled with examples of this. Compare the sermon Paul delivered to the synagogue in Antioch of Pisidia, for instance (Acts 13:16ff), to his address to the people of Athens (Acts 17:22ff). The basic thrust remains the same in both, "Repent and believe the gospel!" But the two messages, both in style and in content, differ a great deal. Why? They are tailored to reach that particular group of people Paul is speaking to on that particular day. Or consider the differences among Paul's many letters. No two are the same. Why? Paul is speaking an unchanging Word to the particular needs of each congregation.

How can I preach to African Americans in the central city without addressing issues of poverty or racism or marriage or teen pregnancy? How can I evangelize Mormons (who have a strong cultural aversion to the cross) without talking about that aversion? How can I console a Zambian who is afraid of the power of witches without meeting that fear head on? How can I preach to middle class Americans without speaking about the dangers of materialism and worldly wealth?

That's why learning about the culture and building relationships with its people are such important activities for a cross cultural missionary. I don't want to be a resounding gong or a clanging symbol. I want to speak the unchanging truth of God's Word in a way people can understand.

Working in partnership

One time I told my brother Ernie something that got him a bit peeved. I was listening to various Malawians speaking Chichewa. I had a real hard time understanding a word of what they were saying. But when my brother spoke, his words were clear as a bell to me. So I mentioned this to him. Do you know why he was peeved? Here he had been speaking Chewa with a high degree of fluency ever since 1968, but he obviously still had an American accent since his words were more intelligible to me than those of a native speaker.

My point? Any cultural outsider, no matter how long he has studied the culture, will always be an outsider to some degree. His understanding will always have some kind of an American accent. I say this not to minimize the important work of cross cultural missionaries – far from it! I say it rather to emphasize how important it is to see those whom we are serving in the host culture as partners in this ministry.

A genuine partnership means cooperating fully with them as we together contemplate mission and outreach strategies. It means mulling through important decisions with them, and always being eager to listen to what

they have to say. A genuine partnership means raising up leaders in the host culture as soon as possible, and then respecting those leaders. We may have a better grip on the gospel (at least at first), and we may have resources and expertise to share, but members of the host culture will always have a better understanding of their own people.

Of all things, this partnership is the most enriching feature of cross cultural work. The give and take of mutual learning and encouragement, the give and take as we discuss the Scriptures from our differing cultural perspectives – these are priceless spiritual gifts God gives through this kind of ministry. People often hesitate to give themselves fully to cross cultural work because of fear – fear that they will lose important parts of their cultural or spiritual identity. What congregational leaders need to emphasize is what will be gained from a partnership in the gospel. In writing to the Romans Paul says, "I long to see you that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong." Then he immediately corrects a possible misunderstanding of his words by saying, "That is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith" (Ro 1:11-12). From his own rich experience as a cross cultural missionary, Paul knew how sharing the gospel could never be a one way street.

"That They May Be One..."

The first Bible passage that came to mind as I considered the topic you had assigned me was John 17:11. It's from Jesus' high priestly prayer, the one he prayed shortly before his sufferings and his death for us all. He was praying for his disciples, men whom he was sending into the world just as he had been sent into the world. He knew the world would treat them no better than it had treated him. This is what he said: "Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name, the name you gave me, that they may be one as we are one."

Notice what he didn't ask for. He didn't ask that his disciples be kept safe in comfortable homes by the shores of the Sea of Galilee. He didn't ask that they could each have a big church with a big steeple and their own name inscribed on it, St. Peter, St. John, St. Matthew. He didn't ask that they be given a nice safe life in a comfortable and tranquil congregation. These things might all be fine and good in their own time and place, but they couldn't keep his disciples safe from the world's hatred, from the Devil's terrors, from the fear of death. So he asked, "Keep them safe by the power of your name."

God's name – his revelation of himself as our loving, Savior God – is all the protection that we need as we go out into the world. We see that name revealed nowhere better than at the cross. That's how far God's love was willing to go for us, even when we didn't know him or want him. That same love will keep us safe wherever it might lead us.

God certainly does urge us "not to lose the message." Scripture is full of such warnings and exhortations. But God does something far greater and much more comforting. He promises to protect us by the power of his name. He will protect us as we seek to reach the lost, who are lost in a world of many cultures. Though all of them are by nature hostile to his grace, he will not only keep us safe as we live among them, but he will bring many of them to know his love. He will claim sons and daughters from every tribe, every tongue, and every culture. They will then be one: one with us, one with Christ, and one with the Father.

With such a promise, we have nothing to fear. We will proclaim the name, and he will protect us by it. And we will be one.