

## Releasing the Gospel from Western Bondage

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*I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. – Romans 1:16-17<sup>1</sup>*

The gospel knows no boundaries. Just as God became flesh and dwelt among us, so the gospel must freely dwell among all cultures. The gospel “*is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes.*” This is good news to *all* peoples.

Over the past five years, I have come to understand the power and simplicity of the gospel. On journey with believers from both Western and non-Western contexts I have seen the gospel embodied in a variety of cultures—from Seattle, Washington to Ulanbattur, Mongolia. My beliefs and lifestyle are emerging from the following assumptions...

- The gospel is culturally translatable.
- The gospel is often held captive by cultural ideologies, traditions and structures.
- In order for the gospel to spread across cultures, the gospel must be free from the control of any single culture.
- The gospel must be de-modernized in order to be translated across cultures—even Western cultures.

### The Powerful Simplicity of the Gospel

When asked by Thomas, “Lord, we don’t know where you are going, so how can we know the way?” (John 14:5), Jesus answered, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). This verse encapsulates what it means to embrace Jesus in all his fullness. The gospel is not an abstract idea or an institutional structure. The gospel is a living reality. Jesus is the *Way*, the *Truth* and the *Life*.

The *Way (hodos)* is Jesus. A way refers to “a natural path or road way.” Jesus is the *Way to life*. Through him we are reconciled to God. He is also the *Way of life*. Through his incarnation and life, Jesus provides a living example that he expects us to continue to live through community (John 13:15; 20:21; I Pet 2:21; I John 2:6). We are on journey with him—he is both our goal and our guide (Isa 35:8; Heb 12:1-3).

The *Truth (aletheia)* is Jesus. Wandering in a sea of relativism, there *is* truth. This truth is not religious dogma, an institution or even religion. Truth is a person. Jesus. We gain hold of what is true through grabbing hold of Jesus. Reality is found in Jesus Christ (Col 2:17). We know truth through our relationship with the author of truth. And it is truth that sets us free (John 8:31-32). The truth of Jesus is the basis for the lifestyle of God’s people. Truth is the basis of the *Way* and the *Way* is the embodiment of the truth.

The *Life (zoe)* is Jesus. Through Jesus we are given life (John 6:35, 51, 63; 11:25). Jesus calls the world not to a new religion or even a better life, but to a new (*kainos*) life (II Cor 5:17; Gal 6:15). To know Jesus is to know life. And this life is like no other. Jesus said, “I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full” (John 10:10; cf. John 15:11). To share in the life of Jesus is to experience him both now *and* forever (John 3:16; 17:3; I John 5:11, 20).

Jesus is the *Way to life* and the *Way of life*. Our message is not a doctrine, philosophy or system of thought. It is not a set of propositions to be argued or compared against. Philosophies may point to truths; but Jesus said, “I am the truth.” Jesus not only *preached* the good news, he *is* the good news.

To every spiritual and relational yearning, the gospel of Jesus is indeed good news. To the alienated, the gospel brings reconciliation. To those who are powerless to change, the gospel is transformational. To those who are despairing, Jesus brings the promise of a future and a hope. To the lonely, the gospel provides the security of loving community. To those searching for meaning, the gospel

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<sup>1</sup> All Scripture quotations, unless noted otherwise, are from the Holy Bible: *New International Version* (NIV). Copyright 1984, International Bible Society.

gives a new identity and purpose for living. The gospel of Jesus answers the spiritual *and* relational longings of all cultures.

The gospel is still incarnate in the “Body of Christ.” Contrary to a modern or hyper-mystical understanding of spirituality, the most profound spiritual experience we can have is not in isolation, but in community (cf. Matt 18:19-20). We cannot fully understand the Way of life outside community. The world sees the reality of Jesus when believers live as the Body of Christ in the world (II Cor 4:6-10; John 13:34-35).

The gospel is culturally translatable. The gospel is not Eastern or Western, Jew or Gentile. The gospel is Jesus. This is the genius of the gospel. Jesus knows no cultural boundaries. When the gospel becomes inculturated or over-contextualized, it becomes less than the good news. It becomes culturally isolated thereby hindering the natural progression across cultures.

### **The Western Bondage of the Gospel**

Whatever influence the gospel had on the Western world, it is dwindling fast. With the curtain of modernity being pushed aside, the new light of postmodernity is revealing the hollowness of the Christendom church and westernized gospel. The modern church has become a subculture on the fringes of culture.

The Western gospel and its corresponding ecclesial expression presents a clear contrast with the early church: community was displaced by radical individualism, the experience of living the faith was replaced by gnosticism,<sup>2</sup> the emphasis on obedience to Jesus shifted to the authority of pragmatism and the priesthood of all believers was substituted by professional clerics. Once a way of living, it is now almost entirely confined to a building or worship service.

In Jerusalem Christianity was a lifestyle, in Rome it became an institution, and in the West—especially North America—it has become an enterprise. Church as a missional movement with a distinct lifestyle was sacrificed on the foundation of institutionalism. And from this emerged the individualization of faith, the monopolization of the ministry and the separation of faith from practice.

Throughout Christendom the church has been willingly squeezed and pushed and diminished and redefined by modernity until the biblical and cultural are indistinguishable. Os Guinness submits a poignant explication of secularized evangelicalism: “Compared with the past, faith today influences culture less. Compared with the past, culture today influences faith more” (1993:16). Church is increasingly characterized by nominality, individualism, relativism and, ultimately, syncretism.<sup>3</sup>

The church sacrificed its integrity for relevance, resulting in syncretism. Wilbert Shenk is accurate when he asserts, “the church in modern culture has succumbed to syncretism in pursuit of evangelization by its uncritical appropriation of the assumptions and methodologies offered by modern culture” (1995:56). Generations of uncritical enculturation have left us with a diluted and impotent church.

These problems transcend Western contexts. Syncretism is a global reality. Because the Western church has been the dominating missionary influence until recently, the effects of syncretism can be seen worldwide. Shenk claims, “This should not surprise us, since the model and practice of church taken to Asia, Africa, and Latin America was that of Christendom, and nominality has cropped up wherever Western missions have gone” (1997:154). For example, my friend, Kasereka Kasomo observed the effects of missionaries who brought more than the gospel to the Wanande people of Eastern Zaire: “I discovered that what we had been calling ‘orthodox Christianity’ was ‘Western syncretistic Christianity.’ He concludes, “our Christianity was doubly syncretistic. Doubly syncretistic, as the Nande Church struggles to be ‘orthodox,’ while really trying to be a Western church” (1994:13).

The problem with the Western church is that we have defined the gospel one way (i.e. scripturally and spiritually), then have established structures and practices that are contradictory (i.e. institutional,

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<sup>2</sup> Gnosticism rests upon a “metaphysical dualism” between the spiritual and material, between soul and body, between metaphysical truth and phenomenal representation, and ultimately between faith and practice. Modern Christianity is built on gnosticism’s high regard for information with no necessary connection with loving obedience to Jesus (See also Lamin Sanneh (1989:17) and Jones (1992)).

<sup>3</sup> Syncretism represents the blending of differing, even contradictory, beliefs into a new belief system that loses the unique essence of the original beliefs. See also W. A. Visser ‘t Hooft In *No Other Name: The Choice Between Syncretism and Christian Universalism* (1963) and also “Evangelism in the Neo-Pagan Situation,” in *International Review of Mission* (1976:83); Nida 1960:184-188; Van der Veer 1994:197).

individualistic, pragmatic and political).<sup>4</sup> We have a normative view of doctrine, but not of practice. To separate faith from practice is to open the door to syncretism. And that is exactly what the modern church has done. The church is no longer faithful to its simple nature of the gospel, nor is it redemptively engaging culture. Modernity has dominated the church, rendering it a servile social institution.

Any ideologies or organizational structures that are imposed upon the gospel will stunt the natural growth and reproductive capacity of the gospel. Nothing should compromise the essential nature of the gospel. We should not want the gospel to be anything less or anything more than what the Word of God makes it. If the church hopes to fulfill her calling in the world, there must be a willingness to let go of any modern cultural perceptions and practices of the gospel and rediscover the powerful simplicity of the gospel and of being God's missionary community actively engaged in the world. In short, the gospel must be de-modernized in order to be translated across cultures.

### **The Gospel Unleashed across Cultures**

The modern church must come to the harsh realization that in many ways its gospel has been influenced more by modernity than by the life of Jesus and patterns of the early church. Renewal is not enough. Nothing less than a radical reorientation is needed for the gospel to break free from the modern influences. The New Testament reveals a gospel far more radical, dangerous, transformational, even revolutionary than we see in the common church of our day.

We all may need to go through a conversion something like the apostle Peter experienced through in Acts 10 and 11. Peter's conversion from an ethnocentric Jew to an advocate for Gentile missions was one of the most significant paradigm shifts in the history of the church.<sup>5</sup> So today, the church must repent of any cultural tradition that hinders the movement of the gospel across cultures—whether modern or post-modern or pre-modern. Just as Gentiles can now receive salvation as Gentiles, so all peoples have a right to be followers of Jesus without having to become Western or to become institutionalized. Every people group is entitled to experience “the Way” of Jesus in their own culture.

### **Authority and Contextualization**

Marked by a rejection of traditional and religious sources of authority, modernity favored reason, knowledge and pragmatism as the roadmap to human achievement and inevitable progress. Such relativism denies divine authority and hinders the natural movement of the gospel. Therefore, a critical question for unleashing the gospel in cultures of relativism is, “By what (or whose) authority do we make decisions regarding contextualization?” Do we base our decisions on tradition (legalism),<sup>6</sup> on what works (pragmatism) or on the latest cultural trends (syncretism)? Contextualization without accountability to objective truth (or metanarrative) will inevitably lead to relativism and syncretism.

There must always be a divine standard by which contextualization is evaluated—especially in the relativistic and pluralistic climate of postmodernity. Genuine contextualization is built on the assumption that there is a timeless and changeless core of the gospel that can be translated into any culture (cf. Sanneh 1989). In the 1974 Lausanne conference, Bruce Nicholls explained,

This Gospel of the kingdom as defined in Holy Scriptures is *totally relevant* to man in the totality of his need. This follows because the Gospel was designed and provided by the same God who made the human heart and who knows the depth of man's alienation from him and from his fellows (1974:647, emphasis in original).

The revelation of Jesus Christ is always translatable. The spontaneous expansion of the gospel will be limited as long as people confuse the normative with the temporal. Namely, we must come to discern

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<sup>4</sup> Even the popular American psychiatrist, M. Scott Peck observes, “It has become apparent to me that the vast majority of churchgoing Christians in America are heretics. The leading—indeed, traditional—heresy of the day I call pseudoceticism. It is this predominant heresy that intellectually allows the Church to fail to teach its followers to follow Jesus” (1987:297).

<sup>5</sup> Note however, Peter's ongoing struggle in Galatians 2:11-16.

<sup>6</sup> Ironically, neither legalism nor relativism can redemptively engage culture. The former seeks to control insiders and the later succumbs to control by outsiders. Legalism isolates and separates itself from both culture and authentic faith. Relativism assumes values are arbitrary and contingent upon the situation and the changing cultures and thereby loses its distinctiveness. Neither provides a solution for being salt and light *in* the world.

between modern forms and methods that have been developed in the modern era with the eternally translatable patterns of the gospel and church. Figure A illustrates four realms of authority which provide a standard for interpreting and living the New Testament in today’s postmodern contexts.<sup>7</sup> This chart distills the essentials from the non-essentials, it helps filter out anything that may hinder the natural and supernatural movement of the gospel across cultures.

| SPHERE OF AUTHORITY                            | DESCRIPTION   | TRANSLATABILITY   |
|--|---|---|
| <b>Christ’s Commands</b><br>(The Core)         | <i>Commands</i> are non-negotiable. Jesus Christ is our ultimate authority. Therefore, our first priority is to faithfully follow Jesus and fulfill his purposes (Matt 28:19-20; John 14:15, 21; I John 5:2-3).   | Fully Translatable<br>No Adaptation<br>Non-Negotiable                     |
| <b>Biblical Principles</b><br>(The Substance)  | <i>Principles</i> refer to Scriptural teachings that complement the words and works of Jesus. Cross-cultural principles can be drawn from the apostolic teachings (Acts 2:42; Rom 16:17; II Thess 3:6, 14; II Tim 3:16).  | Translate to maintain the dynamic equivalent<br>The essence is unchanging |
| Apostolic <b>Patterns</b><br>(The Application) | <i>Patterns</i> are principles and values in action. They are expressed in specific cultural contexts as behaviors, practices and lifestyles of first-century Christians that are normative (I Cor 4:16-17; Phil 3:16-17; I Thess 1:7-8; II Thess 3:9).               | Translate (contextualize) to fit the culture                              |
| <b>Church Practices</b><br>(The Expression)    | Church <i>practices</i> or traditions are culturally inherited and/or established ways of thinking, feeling or doing. They should be tested according to the commands of Christ, biblical principles and then to cultural relevance (Matt 15:3,6; Rom 12:2; Col 2:8). | Non-Translatable<br>Culturally-Specific                                   |

FIGURE A: SPHERES OF AUTHORITY AND CONTEXTUALIZATION

Postmodernity, therefore, calls us to embrace the paradoxical tension of being authoritative and contextualized—to continually evaluate mission strategies for their cultural sensitivity and biblical integrity. This requires us to nurture a keen discernment between the exotic (i.e. modern or culturally-specific) and the essentials (i.e. trans-modern or culturally-translatable).

### Gospel Translation as Journey

Ecclesial translation should be an intrinsically spiritual process because the church is in an endless state of encountering the culture and being encountered. The nature and mission of the gospel demands that we continually wrestle with how to embody the Gospel *in* the world—to be both biblically authoritative and culturally translatable. This ongoing process is guided by two basic questions: 1) What is the Gospel of Jesus? and 2) How will we then live the Gospel of Jesus in this changing culture?

The process of translation is symbiotic or bi-directional. For the gospel to be embodied in a culture requires a mutual exchange between the gospel and the culture. Bosch writes, “Inculturation suggests a *double movement*: there is at once inculturation of Christianity and Christianization of culture. The gospel must remain Good News while becoming, up to a certain point, a cultural phenomenon” (1991:454, emphasis in original). The challenge is to relate to the culture free of cultural trappings foreign to the context (i.e. not to “transfer” one’s own native culture into a new culture). David Hesselgrave and Edward Rommen highlight the tension as they describe the missionary task with its hazards:

The missionary’s ultimate goal in communication has always been to represent the supracultural message of the gospel in culturally relevant terms. There are two potential hazards which must be assiduously avoided in this endeavor: (1) the perception of the

<sup>7</sup> This chart was inspired by George Patterson’s “Three Levels of Authority for Christians” (Patterson and Scoggins 1993:19).

communicator’s own cultural heritage as an integral element of the gospel, and (2) a syncretistic inclusion of elements from the receptor culture which would alter or eliminate aspects of the message upon which the integrity of the gospel depends (1989:1).

Faithful translation demands that we exegete both the biblical patterns and the culture. This helps avoid one of three major errors: (1) *syncretism*, where we engage culture without critically exegeting Scripture, (2) *hypocrisy*, where we may exegete Scripture, but never engage the culture, and (3) *isolationism*, where neither the Scriptures or the culture is effectively engaged. Figure B illustrates the relationship of these approaches in exegeting Scripture and engaging culture.

|                    |             | Engage Culture? |              |
|--------------------|-------------|-----------------|--------------|
|                    |             | <i>High</i>     | <i>Low</i>   |
| Exegete Scripture? | <i>High</i> | Translation     | Hypocrisy    |
|                    | <i>Low</i>  | Syncretism      | Isolationism |

FIGURE B: MODELS OF ENGAGEMENT

The process of translation is neither a science nor a pragmatic methodology, but rather an inherently natural *and* supernatural endeavor. At work in both the church and in the culture, the Holy Spirit freely gives wisdom, guidance and power to the community that strives to embody the gospel in its surrounding environment. Translation is a continuous process of engagement and embodiment. It represents a way of life—the natural function of the missional community moving in the world. This ongoing process can be summarized by the following three movements:

1. **Deconstruct our culturally-specific paradigm of the gospel:** *How have we been shaped by our culture(s)?* In what ways have we been shaped by cultural influences (e.g. educational, religious, family, political, economic)? What are the common cultural/traditional standards used for defining the gospel? How much is translatable across cultures?
2. **Recover the culturally-translatable gospel:** *What is the gospel of Jesus?* What example did Jesus leave us? What didn’t he leave us? What are the biblical essentials of the gospel and church? What are the non-essentials? What is the role of the Holy Spirit in empowering us to live the Way of Jesus?
3. **Embody the gospel in new cultures:** *How will we live this Way in new cultures?* What are the hindrances (and opportunities) for translating the gospel in this context? How can we demonstrate the gospel and Christian community into this culture? How can we guard against drifting away from the simple gospel?

*The love of Jesus and the needs of our world demand that we translate the gospel in all cultures.* To harvest the fruit that the Holy Spirit is yielding, we must abandon any cultural constraints and recapture the powerfully simple gospel. Just as the boy David could not approach Goliath with the weight and encumbrance of the king’s armor, so we must continually identify and remove those factors that inhibit the Body of Christ from moving freely (cf. I Sam 17:38-40; Heb 12:1-3). We must guard against anything that might violate New Testament patterns of mission that lead to the movement of the gospel across cultures.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Stanley Grenz proposes that we embody the gospel in a manner that is post-individualistic, post-rationalistic, post-dualistic and post-noeticentric (1996:167-174).

***The Spontaneous Expansion of the Gospel Across Cultures***  
*The spontaneous expansion of the church reduced to its elements is a very simple thing.* – Roland Allen (1962:156)

In the midst of our current cultural-ecclesial crisis, the most powerful demonstration of the reality of the gospel to postmodern cultures is the people of God embodying the gospel of Jesus—nothing more and nothing less. Anything we might add to the essential Way of Jesus threatens the translatability of the gospel. Only as the gospel becomes a way of life in the culture of the people will there emerge new indigenous movements in and across all cultures.

To live in the Way of Jesus—nothing could be more simple. Nothing could be more difficult. Nothing could be more *real*. Only then can we hope to bring the gospel to the ends of the earth.

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Jonathan currently serves on a church planting team encouraging a movement of indigenous churches in the greater Seattle area. He is also co-CEO of Enkubator, LLC, an interactive media company designed as a tentmaking company to enable the partners to fulfill their mission of equipping indigenous movements worldwide. He earned his Ph.D. from the School of World Mission at Fuller Seminary, where he studied mission to postmodern cultures. Jonathan and Jennifer live with their four children on Bainbridge Island, Washington.

Prior to being sent to the northwest, Jonathan helped start Life Community, a fellowship of churches in southern California. He was commissioned in 1994 as a missionary and coach serving indigenous movements in a variety of cultures from Los Angeles, California to Ulanbattur, Mongolia. Jonathan also served seven years as church planter strategist for the greater Los Angeles area with the North American Mission Board and as adjunct professor at Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary.