

# Cultural Variation in Conscience: Part of God's Design

by Sally Folger Dye

**W**hy don't missionaries love each other?" an experienced pastor asked my husband during a seminar at the principal evangelical Bible college in Papua New Guinea (Dye, S. 1983, 23). "What makes you think they don't love each other?" Wayne replied. Another pastor explained, "Because they are not welcome in one another's homes without an invitation. They never just 'drop in' for meals; they only visit by appointment. People who love each other are welcome at any time, and are glad to share what they have.

Wayne explained that in our culture people show love and hospitality by putting on very nice meals, which require time and planning to prepare. This explanation convinced them even more that we missionaries don't love one another.

Such cross-cultural misunderstandings are common. I first heard criticisms at a mission center where workers told me, "Some of the missionaries in your group are not Christians...they get very angry." A Baptist pastor in Yaoundé, Cameroon formed an independent church because he wanted women to wear head coverings and sit on the opposite side of the church from the men. He was concerned that the mixed choirs and mixed Sunday school classes that the missionary had set up were causing temptation.

Cross-cultural disagreements about what constitutes right and wrong behavior are the common experience of overseas missionaries everywhere. This raises many questions: How can the sacrificial love and daily lifestyle of missionaries not appear loving to local people? Why do Christians from different parts of the world judge each other as unloving? What is the relationship between conscience, culture and the work of the Holy Spirit? How can missionaries use this information in their cross-cultural interaction?

As resident missionaries in Papua New Guinea and Kenya (and consultants in many other countries), Wayne and I have wrestled with these questions. We have identified some foundational Scriptural concepts that have alleviated conflicts when applied with wisdom and love. We have often lived far from the academic concerns

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*Sally Folger Dye is currently on the faculty of the Graduate Institute of Applied Linguistics in Dallas, Texas. She, along with her husband, Wayne, served with Wycliffe Bible Translators and SIL for 25 years in a Bible translation and literacy program among the Babinemo people of Papua New Guinea. She earned her MA in missiology from the School of Intercultural Studies at Fuller Theological Seminary. Sally has served as a consultant and trainer in Scripture Use in over 20 countries around the world, including five years in Kenya and two years in India.*

found in most books on ethics, so our focus is practical. Our minds always turn to what might make a difference to the spiritual growth of the culturally diverse global Body of Christ.

### *Cultures and God's Moral Order*

God initiated the differentiation of cultures and languages with the command to Noah, "Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth" (Genesis 9:1, NIV<sup>1</sup>). From the tower of Babel (when He prevented them from speaking the same language) through Pentecost (with the command to preach to all nations) on to Revelation (when some from every tribe, nation, language and people group enter heaven), the Bible is clear that cultural variation is part of God's plan for humans. It appears in Scripture that God also built moral order into human life, partly by establishing the family. It is natural that parents give moral and social direction to their children. In addition, each family lives in a community with leaders who take responsibility for peaceful living. Each community is part of a nation. All levels have power to make rules and to punish offenders.

In most mono-cultural communities throughout history people have generally agreed with each other about what is right. Naroll refers to a web of moral influence that acts as a "transmitter of morality" in each society as a "moral network" or a moralnet (1983, 19, 34). The idea of a moralnet is extended here to include the moral structure built into each nation and the subcultures within it around the world. I have avoided the term "social network" for this discussion, because that phrase seldom includes the moral aspects of social interaction.

The following six aspects of moral order are described or alluded to in the Bible.

#### 1. God's Core Commands

There is a remarkable similarity between the Ten Commandments and core parts of the moralnets of societies

around the world, even those that have not been exposed to the Commandments. My husband and I have asked people about right and wrong behavior in nearly a hundred ethnic groups on six continents. All have some form of law against stealing, adultery, murder, false witness, and disrespect of parents and leaders. Societies cannot function peacefully without these laws. Most societies also have laws about honoring God, though they seldom have all of the first four commandments.

Although God has given a universal moral code, it appears that He has allowed each cultural group to vary in the way the people within the group perceive the rules and carry them out. For example, every society has laws



against murder, but cultures vary on when killing is considered murder. When someone in a country's military kills someone under orders, citizens of that country do not consider it murder. Every society includes laws against stealing, but each society decides what a person has the right to take, and therefore when taking becomes stealing. Businesses in the United States display more concern about stealing time than stealing office supplies for personal use. In African offices, people are allowed more time in greetings and relationship building, but are stricter on the personal use of supplies.

Jesus changed the emphasis from focusing on the details of the Ten

Commandments and the Jewish laws to two core commands:

'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments. (Matthew 22:37-40)

The challenge for the church and missions is the implications of having "all the Law" hanging on loving God in a deep personal heart relationship and loving your neighbor "as yourself." Most astonishing is the emphasis on how that individual wants to be loved himself. Ultimately, fulfilling the law depends on how people in each culture have been programed by their moralnet to love as they want others to love them.

From our own visits to cultures around the world, we realize that every culture shows love to their neighbors in different ways. Furthermore, the outworking of that love includes all kinds of family rituals and social interaction that are very different from neighboring cultures.

Each society has its particular moralnet, and its people apply its moral rules in essentially the same way. When a person hears, "Love your neighbor as yourself," "Do not steal," or "Do not kill," each understands what it means—to them. It is that cultural understanding of what is right that God has written in the conscience.

#### 2. Leaders Maintain Law and Order

The Bible affirms the validity of varying moral orders when it declares,

Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. (Romans 13:1a)

It appears that God ordained community law and order to enable the smooth functioning of society. He expects everyone to respect leaders of family, community, and nation as those leaders create and enforce rules to clarify their moral values and protect the people from offenders.

The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves.... not only because of possible punishment but also as a matter of conscience. (Romans 13:1b–2, 5b)

Here the Apostle Paul indicates a connection between laws and authorities and personal conscience. Solomon described the function of conscience and what happens when people disregard those who contribute to its formation.

The Lord's light penetrates the human spirit, exposing every hidden motive.... If you insult your father or mother, your light will be snuffed out in total darkness. (Proverbs 20:27, 20, NLT)

Rebellion against parents and leaders is also rebellion against God and can cause internal malfunction within a society.

### 3. Conscience Maintains the Standard

God designed the world so that each individual has a conscience that is programmed by family and community leaders. The Bible describes the core function of conscience.

...and all who sin under the law will be judged by the law. For it is not those who hear the law who are righteous in God's sight, but it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous. (Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts sometimes accusing them and at other times even defending them.) This will take place on the day when God will judge men's secrets through Jesus Christ, as my gospel declares. (Romans 2:12b–16)

The essential "requirements of the law are written on their hearts...(and) consciences." It is formed in the context

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of their moralnet and agrees with it, accusing or defending their actions on the basis of that community's and family's standards for good behavior. Conscience is sensitive to social rules, ideals, customs, personal convictions, as well as moral standards. Jewish and Christian traditions have moralnets based mainly on the Ten Commandments and these are foundational in their consciences. For communities that "do not have the law...they are a law for themselves." The standards of these cultures will be formed by their particular moralnets as the basis for individual conscience judgments and at the final judgment.

Western society does not prepare missionaries to deal with conscience issues beyond their own. It tends to follow the general conclusions of secular academics today, viewing the individual's conscience as being too subjective to be of any use to that individual or society. Unfortunately, modern missionaries have generally adopted this view of the conscience. As a result, they are often not aware of the strategic role that conscience plays in other cultures where moralnets are less conflicted than their own.

Anthropologist Robert Priest describes conscience as

a cultural universal and natural faculty...capable of being studied, analyzed, and understood through empirical methods. (1994, 293)

It is essential for anyone who wants to witness effectively to discover the moral standard written on the consciences of people in a particular cultural community.

### 4. Falling Short of that Standard Is Sin

Each person's culturally conditioned conscience gives an emotionally painful signal whenever he fails to follow it. That sense of guilt or shame was intended by God for that person's good, to give

incentive to do what is right. Formed in the context of family and community, individual consciences are partners in reinforcing community values.

The definition of sin most often used in the Bible is "to miss the mark." This is the common core in both Hebrew, *Chata/chatta'ah* and Greek, *hamartia*. When a person does not live up to his own inner standard his actions trigger shame or guilt signals. The Apostle James put it this way, "If anyone, then, knows the good they ought to do and doesn't do it, it is sin for them" (James 4:17). Sin, then, is falling short of the standard of good behavior in a person's conscience formed by his moralnet. It is the cultural moralnet that forms his conscience even where that differs from biblical commandments.

Few people who fall short of their inner standards want to face that truth. As John says, "people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil" (John 3:19b). Normally, a person tries to hide failure to measure up, leading to a heart that is "deceitful above all things" (Jeremiah 17:9). Western culture would see this as hiding failure in the unconscious mind. James describes how these hidden "desires that battle within you" cause quarrels and fights (James 4:1).

Human nature has many mechanisms that assist a person in hiding these unacceptable thoughts and actions by denying, rationalizing, reframing or commonly projecting blame on others—all to avoid facing the truth of failure (Dye, S. 1974, 80–88).

When a person repeatedly disregards his inner standard, the Word variously describes that person's conscience as weakened, seared, hardened, corrupted, defiled, double-minded, in darkness, etc.

Counter-productively, the entertainment industry and even some counselors teach people to deliberately go against conscience and lower their standards to avoid guilt feelings, or give medications to dull them. Paul revealed the pride in these human manipulations in light of God's design and authority, when he wrote,

How stupid they are! They make up their own standards to measure themselves by, and they judge themselves by their own standards! (2 Corinthians 10:12 GNT).

A person's conscience is based on cultural values and can be further distorted in the darkness of the unconscious mind. Therefore it is not an exact reflection of God's absolute law. Nevertheless, it does accomplish God's purpose as He works through moral-nets to inform people that there is a standard and they fall short of it.

Amazingly, whatever the cultural standard is, no one can achieve it without God's help (Romans 3:10–24). People still fail to follow it, and that failure is sin. "For God has bound everyone over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all" (Romans 11:32). Understanding that all fail and how to use that understanding in communication is the key for effective Christian witness in every culture.

### 5. Community Etiquette Expresses Love and Respect

Mono-cultural communities regulate greetings, body language, proper dress, and other polite behavior through everyday social activities commonly referred to as etiquette.<sup>2</sup> These are intended to express respect, loving kindness, and hospitality when people interact with others and with the supernatural. These actions often become ritualized over many years into what outsiders tend to describe as quaint rituals that appear to them to be irrelevant. Yet, these behaviors are reinforced by everyone an individual respects and loves.

In Papua New Guinea I once asked an insightful woman about the rules for polite behavior. She responded, "We don't have etiquette. We just do the right thing in every situation." Clearly, she had identified the word "etiquette" with Western behavioral rules. She went on to show me the "right thing" in each situation; she followed a whole system of guidelines for loving her neighbor in greetings, visiting, eating, marketing, peacemaking, etc. Papua New Guineans clearly judged others as good or bad by how they followed these rules that she thought were universal but most of the missionaries did not know existed! Many of these were opposite to missionary practice and contributed to the social isolation between them.



People who go against the courteous rules for loving, respectful actions are normally considered impolite, disrespectful, unloving or even immoral. These social interaction rules are regulated by their consciences and will convince those who don't follow them that they are failing. Members of the society will express their judgments of offenses verbally and may carry out physical or emotional punishment, depending on how seriously they view the offense. Often they expect their ancestors or other spirits to take vengeance on the whole community for an offense by one or two individuals. This is one reason that such cultures tend to resist change.

Historically, hierarchical cultures tended to use elaborate social rules to separate the elite from ordinary people. As societies like America industrialized, they rebelled against the divisive etiquette rules. This resulted in a level of equality and freedom that proved more effective in integrating immigrants from a variety of moral networks. In this more recent multicultural context the polite customs of any one subculture are losing their meaning, giving way to the more casual expressions that are helping integrate people into the whole multicultural society. Missionaries to other countries often inherit this negative view of etiquette and disregard as trivial their host community's rules rather than using those customs effectively to show love and respect.

### 6. Criticizing Others Reinforces Moral Responsibility

God has set up an amazing system for executing judgment, "I will deal with them according to their conduct, and by their own standards I will judge them," Ezekiel 7:27b. When a person judges others, it reveals and reinforces the personal inner standard in his conscience that will be used at the final judgment.

Paul clarifies it:

You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge another, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things. (Romans 2:1)

Jesus said it this way:

But I tell you that everyone will have to give account on the Day of Judgment for every empty word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned. (Matthew 12:36–37)

In fact, "nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight," even deeply hidden conflicts which reveal every thought and motive (Hebrews 4:12–13; see also 1 Chronicles 28:9).

Frances Schaeffer once suggested that each person's mind acts as a camcorder, recording something a person has casually said about someone else's wrong behavior and on other occasions recording that person doing the same thing. At the final judgment those recordings will be juxtaposed. For example, if a person says to someone, "Never cheat on your income tax," and years later cheats on his own tax, the recording of the earlier statement and that of his own action will be juxtaposed at the Judgment.

*No one in the world will be judged according to someone else's standard of behavior at the Judgment Day*—not even the standards of a Christian mentor. Each is judged by his own inner standard that he uses to judge others. This is effective even though the inner standard of an individual may be altered over a period of years.

You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge another, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things. Now we know that God's judgment against those who do such things is based on truth. (Romans 2:1-2)

Since God has set up a system in which each person is judged on the basis of their own judgmental words springing from their own personal standard, Jesus does not have to go through a lengthy questioning session with each individual at His judgment seat. He says, "I pass judgment on no one. But if I do judge, my decisions are true" (John 8:15-16).

*God's moral system that transcends all the human cultures of the world is a profoundly fair tool for judging every individual in every culture around the world.* Whatever standard has been imprinted in the conscience by the moralnet is what is used as the basis for criticizing others and in judging them at the final judgment. Therefore, culture has a profound effect on what

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actions will be judged. The same action can be judged differently in varying cultural settings, depending on its meaning. How could anyone but God have set up such an overriding system of law and order that would accomplish His eternal purposes?

People who have made a practice of judging others will have significantly more of what they said about others played back when their own words and subsequent actions are used against them. Leaders and teachers who know a great deal reveal their standards and judgments as they teach others (James 3:1). People who are learning-impaired will be judged according to their limited ability.

This section has described six aspects of moralnets: God's commands, leaders and laws, standards in conscience, guilt and shame signals, showing love through etiquette and personal judgments of others. When everyone submits and cooperates with the moral network, these aspects work together to create a smooth functioning society.

When a society turns from its moralnet, the results can be ugly. When corrupt leaders selfishly misuse their power in ways that prevent the society from meeting the basic needs of its people, the result is serious oppression. Throughout history we can see examples of God allowing corrupted authorities to fall. Yet, God has and will continue to use the resulting chaos as an opportunity to bring whole societies back to Himself.

What is most amazing is that even if most of the first five aspects of the moralnet fail in a society or an individual, the sixth still works. The judgments each individual has made of others are still somehow intact in the mind to indict each at the judgment.

### ***Conflict Results When Different Cultures Interact***

Moral conflict results when people from different moralnets come into close contact with each other. When earnest Christians from different cultural communities interact, misunderstandings are normal. Those in a given group judge others from a different group on the basis of their own moral network. As a result, each interprets as ethical failure the behavior of someone who follows a different set of social rules. This problem has undermined cross-cultural communication of the gospel since the first century AD.

The Apostle Paul saw these conflicts in the early church and addressed them in his letters, especially in Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8-10. The sharpest of these conflicts were between Jewish and Gentile followers of Jesus. Jewish followers had consciences formed by their understanding of the Mosaic Law. Jews expected Gentile believers to follow all their laws, including circumcision. This particular law was not just meaningless to the Greeks, it was repulsive. Greek culture did not allow them to cut their bodies in any way.

Jewish Christians kept many Jewish holy days and Jewish moral rules not shared by Greek Christians. Jews judged the Greek believers for not keeping Jewish holy days; Greeks did not even associate keeping Jewish holy days with serving Christ. At the same time, Greek Christians judged the Jews for eating meat offered to idols. Paul appears to be saying here that Jewish believers were in concurrence with him when he said,

...we know that an idol stands for something that does not really exist;... But not everyone knows this truth. Some people have been so used to idols that to this day when



they eat such food they still think of it as food that belongs to an idol; their conscience is weak, and they feel they are defiled by the food. (1 Cor. 8:4, 7).

Thus, in the first century, Jewish followers would eat the excess meat sold in the market place, even if it had been used in pagan sacrifices. The consciences of the Greek converts were formed in the context of their idolatrous cultures. To them, idols were real. People worshipped them by eating the meat. They "knew" the idols had power, but chose to trust God instead. Paul urged Jewish and Greek believers to stop judging one another (Romans 14:1-12; 1 Corinthians 4:3-5).

Misunderstanding and mutual judging can occur over seemingly ordinary behavior. In the West when a person knocks on the door of a house, he is politely requesting a favor from the resident. In New Guinea an upright man will not knock, but stands outside a window, clearing his throat or calling to request entry. To western females he appears to be staring at them provocatively. The immoral man knocks lightly on the door to avoid recognition by family members, because he is propositioning the woman inside. The one form, knocking, has different meanings in different cultures and is therefore judged differently in each.

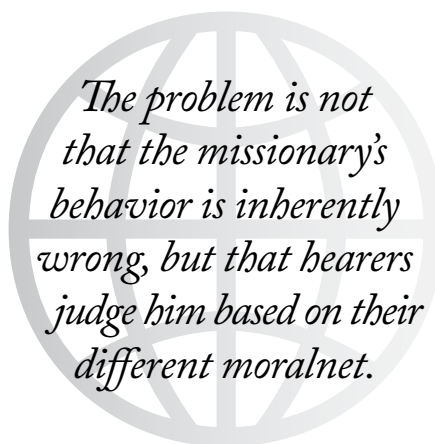
This close tie between social customs and expressions of love and respect helps to explain why the pastors in my husband's seminar would accuse the missionaries of not loving one another. Although these pastors had been Christians for years and had had extensive interaction with Westerners, often having been educated by them, they continued to judge these outsiders on the basis of their own rules for loving behavior.

### Multicultural Societies Send Conflicting Messages

In a multicultural society many different moralnets overlap and intersect. The average person growing up in Western culture is influenced by a

combination of competing ethical ideas coming from the different influential groups in their lives (e.g., family, neighbors, religion, schools, national laws, news and entertainment). Those ideas agree at some points but conflict at others. Multiple intersecting moralnets create confusion and can erode community standards as well as individual consciences.

These differences in values are painful enough to drive people to interact socially with their own peer group as much as possible. Adults gravitate toward people with whom they feel comfortable, usually those who live by the same or similar values. For instance, Christians interact with other Christians of similar persuasion, often



from the same denomination. Atheists tend to band together. Immigrants often prefer to live in neighborhoods with other like-minded immigrants.

Major moralnet differences become focalized during political rallies leading up to major elections. The two major American political parties have quite different beliefs and polarized moral standards on certain issues. For example, each has a different definition of when life begins. Both agree that murder is wrong, but their focal difference about when life begins leads one side to accuse the other of either murder or of the oppression of women. While one side believes that life

begins at conception, the other side truly believes a fetus is not yet human and they actually think it is all right to "kill" it. All over the world, cultures have different ideas about when an infant becomes human. In Papua New Guinea, a newborn is not accepted as human until it is washed.

Moralnet values come into conflict most often in the context of institutions of public education, the workplace, and crowded housing complexes. While adults can limit the input of conflicting messages reasonably well (and thereby avoid the most destructive results of cross-cultural conflict), children and young people are more often caught in a tangled web of moralnets and thus suffer most deeply from the resulting confusion of values.

Although the conscience of a child is mainly formed within the family, other moralnets lure them to disrespect and even turn against their parents' values, resulting in inner conflict. If teachers inculcate a different standard or tell children they can choose whatever standards they want, it may lead to rebellion against parents and "testing the limits." When teens are trapped in an environment of conflicting moral teachings, it can create a sense of confusion, hopelessness, depression, or anger.

### When Missionaries Ignore Moralnets

When a missionary follows his own conscience in ways that run counter to the consciences of his hearers, his behavior creates barriers to his message. The core of the problem is not that the missionary's behavior is wrong in and of itself, but that hearers judge him based on their different moralnet.

*The Pineapple Story* (Gothard and Koning, 1978) tells how a missionary in Irian Jaya paid a man to plant pineapple shoots he had brought in from the outside world. The pineapples kept disappearing. Knowing nothing of wage labor, the planter

went by the village rule, “My hands plant them. My mouth eats them.” He was also distributing them to his relatives. The missionary brushed it off as “the rule of the jungle,” unconsciously assuming his society’s rule was the only valid one, that the employer owns the produce. He did try some compromises he saw as reasonable, but the pineapples continued to disappear. He began making threats to encourage them to stop stealing: closing the store, then the clinic and bringing in a fierce dog that kept everyone away. He was defeating his purpose. On furlough, he finally gave “his” pineapples over to God at a Gothard Seminar. After several months back the people praised him, “You have become a Christian, haven’t you? ...Because you don’t get angry anymore” (Ibid, 29). The story shows that he never did understand the cross-cultural conflict. He made giving things to God the focus of his book, but the people saw his actions as putting a curse on the pineapples. Giving over to God his “rights” of ownership did make an amazing difference in his life—a practice that I would recommend to all of us. Nevertheless, there are clear advantages to understanding different worldviews in today’s multicultural world.

Priest uses a series of diagrams to illustrate this mismatch and summarizes it this way:

In the cross-cultural context, the missionaries who attempt to live an exemplary life and ‘be a good witness’ will naturally tend to do so with reference to their own consciences rather than with reference to the conscience of those to whom they speak. The result is that their actions—in areas addressed by native consciences but unaddressed by the missionaries (or differently addressed by theirs)—will tend to be judged immoral. (Priest 1994, 301, proposition 11)

Priest lists some other ways missionary actions are misinterpreted: judgmental, a new system of taboos, policeman, encouraging dependency, divisive,

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active opposition, or even provoking the formation of independent churches (1994, 301–306).

Some missionaries assume, as I once did, that when their hosts become Christians they will start to show love and respect in the same ways that the missionaries do. Instead, these believers’ consciences tell them that following their own culture’s social etiquette is the right way to show love and respect. It is not uncommon to see new believers turn from many of the old ways as they go to the Bible for direction, yet continue to follow “quaint” rules when interacting with others. Their deep desire to keep God’s command to “love one another” causes them to follow these social rules even more tenaciously. They cannot understand why the missionaries refuse to join them in what they see as “God’s laws” of love.

These opposing judgments trip up missionaries in many different countries. In most kinship-based groups around the world, generosity is essential for survival and is often the highest value and yardstick for judging everyone. In such societies, missionaries who bring in three months’ supply of food and share little of it are considered worse than stingy. In hierarchical societies, respect for parents is the highest value. When missionaries teach new Christians to turn from family to follow Christ, they are sending a mixed message. “Turn away from sin and follow Christ,” but “go against your conscience by disobeying your parents to do it.”

In Papua New Guinea, I created a cross-cultural interaction game to help new missionaries understand the effect of etiquette on relationships. Each player received either a round or a square nametag. Without the players

knowing it, the shape of the nametag corresponded to the rules of interaction they would be expected to follow during the game. People wearing the round nametags received points for following the social rules of the host country and lost points if they violated them. Conversely, people wearing the square nametags received or lost points based on whether they followed or disobeyed the social rules of their home culture. After three ten-minute interactions with each other, the participants were completely polarized into two groups. This helped us understand why social interaction is limited when cross-cultural workers fail to adopt local etiquette. We have observed the resulting social division at missionary centers in Papua New Guinea, India, Philippines, Mexico, Brazil, Colombia, and many countries in Africa.

### *Using Moralnets in Cross-Cultural Witness*

When we realize that cultural variation is actually God’s plan, it is far easier to accept the value differences that exist between another culture and our own. Knowing we can be more effective gives incentive to study their moralnet and adapt to its standards. Here are five guidelines to use what you learn in your witness.

#### **1. Study Their Moralnet and See How They Use It.**

Missionaries can study what people see as moral and loving interaction, including how to behave as a guest in the community. A new missionary needs to find host people who are aware of the conflict and will teach him their moralnet. An effective missionary must be aware when he is functioning within the people’s moralnet and interpreting behavior according to their meanings. He must also

be aware that his own conscience was formed within a different moralnet, so it cannot be trusted to enable him to interpret his host's behavior.

The following are useful topics for study:

- Learn and follow social etiquette rules and conform to focal values, especially those involved with caring for others.
- Learn how the social hierarchy works. Ask where you fit and how to interact respectfully on each level. It is different in every culture.
- Learn and obey community rules as much as you can.
- Discover the standards in the consciences of your host people by listening to their judgments and complaints about what others do, especially outsiders. Listen to village court judgments of others. All help you understand what is sin for them.
- Discover the local variation of each of the Ten Commandments, e.g., when is taking something stealing or which forms of killing are considered murder.
- Invite adults to tell their moral stories and, at times, their explanations for wrong-doing. (Dye, T. W. 1976, 37–38)
- Prayerfully consider how to witness within their moralnet.

## 2. Do What is Necessary to be Considered a Good Person

Cross-cultural workers entering a mono-cultural community *must do whatever it takes to be seen as a good person in the eyes of those people*. Paul described his own ministry this way.

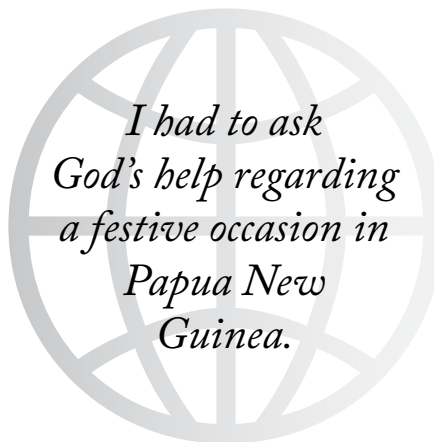
I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible.... I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. (1 Corinthians 9:19, 23)

Paul tells missionaries to “commend yourselves to everyone’s good conscience,” even when it limits your own freedom to do something your way (2 Corinthians 4:2). He told the Corinthian

believers that, while eating meat was not sinful in itself, he would not eat it for the rest of his life if necessary to avoid causing other believers to fall into sin. (1 Corinthians 10:25–33). When there is a conflict, Paul says,

Accept him... without passing judgment on disputable matters.... So whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God. (Romans 14:1, 22)

When going to a new culture, first seek out one or more insightful local people and convince them that you were raised with different rules for good behavior and want to “do the



right thing in every situation.” Otherwise they may think you are deliberately going against their rules; after all, everyone they respect does things the way they do. By following his host culture’s etiquette, a missionary can show people that he is good from the very first polite greeting and interaction.

That does not mean that he should go against his own conscience. In case of a definite conflict, missionaries can ask God for wisdom. One can often ask to be excused from an activity. In some cultures it can be explained as a personal taboo.

I had to ask God’s help regarding a festive occasion in Papua New Guinea. The women had made me a beautifully dyed grass skirt, which they wanted me to wear at an upcoming celebration. In

their eyes it was modest: not too low at the waist, not too short, and full in front and back. My conscience, however, saw grass skirts as indecent, especially with the two inch split down each side that exposed my outer thighs. After prayer a solution came to mind. I simply wore my one-piece bathing suit under the grass skirt. They considered the suit immodest when worn alone. The combination looked a little strange, but in the end the consciences of both cultures were satisfied.

Witnesses must go beyond showing they are good people in all the cultural ways. “Our love should not be just words and talk; it must be true love, which shows itself in action” (1 John 3:18 GNT). Discover people’s real needs and show Jesus’ love by praying for them when someone is sick, needs protection, faces persecution and all kinds of other specific needs through a special witnessing tool called a good news encounter which has been used to bring thousands to Christ (Dye 1985, 45–48). Another essential tool is the Power encounter (Tippet, 206), used to show God is more powerful than the idols or spirits they have been worshiping. It is amazing how God answers these prayers, especially when people are hearing the truth about Him for the first time.

## 3. Focus Witness on the Areas of Failure to Achieve Their Standard

Most people in any society have a desire to do what is right. “The content of conscience is sufficiently close to God’s own moral standards as to be God’s initial reference point in revealing our own moral failures and need of grace” (Priest 1994, 298; see also p. 309).

Ask about their standards and goals and how well they achieve them. What do they see as the evils in their society and those of societies around them? Answers to these questions may lead to a discussion about God’s solution. Some worldviews perceive failure very differently. Be ready to hear them out. Some see all causation of failure as



outside themselves. In parts of New Guinea, women are blamed for all village problems, even the deaths. Discover their perceptions of how to right these wrongs.

Even if the moralnet has become so corrupted that the culture justifies heinous forms of murder, adultery, slavery or other evils, God's way works, using their own judgments of others to convict them at the final judgment. Furthermore, God often allows corrupt cultures that fail to meet the needs of their populations to collapse or revitalize or be taken over by more effective nations. People in failing cultures are often more aware of unmet needs and more open to admitting personal failure—even turning to Christ.

Eventually, people realize that they cannot achieve their personal standard of what is right. Witnesses can speed up this process as they show love and learn their key issues. Failure is the Holy Spirit's powerful tool to bring individuals to repentance and conversion from every moralnet.

Anyone working along with the Spirit can use a person's recognition of failure to show him that Christ is the only one who can rescue him from the guilt and conflict he experiences when he falls short of his own standard.

#### 4. Show the Bible's Plan for Achieving Impossible Standards

All people everywhere are in an impossible situation. Each has a conscience that puts within him a desire to do what is right. Each has a sin nature that makes it impossible for anyone to achieve that culturally conditioned standard.

However, God was aware of that before the foundation of the world and designed a plan (Ephesians 1:4–11) to overcome the problem of the sin nature that would fit every person in every culture in the world.

For what the law was powerless to do because it was weakened by the

**D**esigning truth encounters to answer key questions and bring truth into a specific situation is a valuable skill.

flesh, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. (Romans 8:3–4)

There is a place for showing people what God's laws are, but those laws cannot give them the power to achieve them. The moralnet serves a similar purpose. It serves as a standard no one can achieve. Anyone who accepts God's solution and Christ's sacrifice can do what is right when living in the power of God's Spirit. (It is, however, easier for those cultures that use sin offerings to comprehend this need for a divine sacrifice once and for all.) Different passages will be more effective with different people groups in helping them have an encounter with the truth; the choice of passages depends on their view of their problem. Designing truth encounters (Kraft, 452–454) to answer key questions and bring truth into a specific situation is a valuable skill.

The core teaching of the Bible is that salvation is by grace based solely on Christ's substitutionary death for our sins, not on anything we can do to earn salvation. We can and should bask in that grace, while recognizing its purpose:

For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do. (Ephesians 2:10)

Grace is the key to a clean heart where Christ is free to work (Col. 1:27). This is the secret to finding the Spirit's power to obey the commands to love God and others.

After three years among the Bahinemo people of Papua New Guinea, my husband was translating the list in Mark

7:22 of the evil actions that come out of the heart (Dye, T. W. 1976, 38–40). He asked the people, "What did your ancestors tell you about these things?" The men immediately agreed that the ancestors had told them all these actions were bad. When he asked them if any of them did these bad things, one leader spoke for all of them, "Definitely. Who could keep all of those rules? We are people of the ground." We took that opportunity to explain that God was angry because they had not followed what they knew to be right. That is why He sent Jesus to pay the price for their failure.

After that day in 1967 the Bahinemos never lost the awareness that the Bible speaks of a holy God who is concerned about their personal behavior. Within a year, they had started their own church, appointed their own leaders, created their own worship songs, and had asked a pastor from a neighboring language group to baptize them. A strong church continues today.

In any specific situation, missionaries need to intimately understand a people's worldview and their specific short-comings as the people themselves perceive them. Then they need to find which passages best clarify God's solution for those issues.

#### 5. Let God Transform Their Standard

One of the ways the Holy Spirit leads people to conversion is by using their failure to achieve the standards of their own culturally conditioned consciences. Then He uses the Word of God to lead each one to a higher standard of loving others as themselves.

For you have put off the old self with its habits and have put on the new self. This is the new being which God, its Creator, is constantly renewing in

his own image, in order to bring you to a full knowledge of himself. (Colossians 3:9–10 GNT)

...offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God...Do not conform to the patterns of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will. (Romans 12:1–2)

Each time a Christian learns more about what God wants from the Bible (whether in a sermon, a personal devotion, a book or article, or just in the course of daily life), the standard in his conscience is modified in response to that new knowledge. As each person turns from sin (as he recognizes his failure at that point), asks forgiveness, seeks to keep his conscience clear and his heart clean, the Holy Spirit leads and reforms him by His grace.

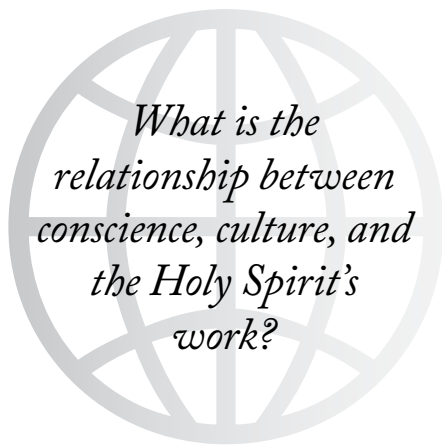
If a person desires to obey God through faith in His grace, he will learn to recognize the painful guilt (or shame) signal as a good thing, admit the truth of failure and claim the cleansing for failure that Jesus provides (James 4:4–12). By this cyclical transformation process, the Holy Spirit enables each to walk in increasing obedience to His higher standard, but within his own culture or subculture. We learn from our growing disciples as they learn from us. John clarifies this deeper life standard in several places in his first letter to the church:

Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did.... Anyone who does not do what is right is not God's child; nor is anyone who does not love their brother and sister....Let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth....The one who keeps God's commands lives in him, and he in them. (1 John 2:6; 3:10b, 18, 24a)

This transformation from the old life to loving as Christ loved can take place within a few years with good teaching and open hearts. Or it can take a lifetime in a worldly atmosphere with

poor teaching. Unfortunately, weak churches and teachers may focus on a superficial salvation experience without teaching people how “to advance God's work—which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith. Some have departed from these and have turned to meaningless talk.” Timothy warns against Christians who make a “shipwreck with regard to faith” by ignoring conscience, which then becomes “seared as with a hot iron”. They may then become false teachers following “deceiving spirits and things taught by demons.” (1 Timothy 1:4–6, 19; 4:1–2).

The stress that takes place while adjusting to another culture can tempt missionaries to become critical within their



new context (Dye, S. 1974, 80–85). They are tempted to judge others and come under God's judgment themselves, a common side effect of culture shock. Paul urges Christians to “...examine ourselves first.... so that we shall not be condemned together with the world” (1 Corinthians 11:31, GNT). God used this passage to discipline me personally. I had to let His Spirit search my heart and conscience and clean it. I also had to forgive and build others up rather than criticize them.

God promises to give us “everything we need for a godly life” (2 Peter 1:3) within the culture in which we live. These promises are to every person in every culture who turns to God—each

can be forgiven based on what Christ did, and each can fulfill the standard for goodness written in his own heart. God will provide everything he needs to do it.

### *Concluding Summary*

This paper has tried to answer questions that have broad implications for Christian behavior in every culture. What is the relationship between conscience, culture, and the Holy Spirit's work? How do missionaries use these insights to be seen as a good person and to witness effectively?

We have focused on the biblical basis of six aspects of the cultural moralnet including: the Ten Commandments, leaders and laws, conscience, sin, etiquette and judging others. The resulting customs vary widely, but each culture is programmed to see their resulting lifestyle as the only right way to live. As a result people in different cultures will naturally judge outsiders on the basis of their own standards. Judging each other definitely interferes with effective witness and clear communication of the gospel, especially if the Christian witnesses do not measure up to both their own standards and those of the culture where they are witnesses.

Missionaries can increase their effectiveness significantly if they use the five guidelines presented here for working within the moralnet of a specific culture. These include: studying the specifics relating to all six aspects of the moralnet, doing what it takes to be seen as good, understanding their standards and sensing failure, showing how God can help, and then letting God transform their lives.

The emphasis of these five guidelines for witnessing is on learning and following their host's own cultural rules for loving interactions as much as possible in order to be seen as a good person from their host's perspective. In that way the witness will earn their respect and can work along with the

Holy Spirit who has been preparing the way. After laying that cultural foundation, the witness can show how Jesus meets their real needs and has answers for their questions about the truth. The witness can then focus on Jesus' plan to set their hosts free from the power of sin and to achieve their own standards of goodness. The people will then respect the witness as he challenges them to accept God's forgiveness and begin a personal relationship with Him, obey His Word and expect the Holy Spirit to transform their minds, so they can live a life that pleases God. **IJFM**

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> All Biblical references in this article are from the New International Version unless otherwise noted.

<sup>2</sup> Etiquette is "the rules indicating the proper and polite way to behave; ... the conduct or procedure required by good breeding or prescribed by authority to be observed in social or official life." <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/etiquette>.

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