

Culture and Conscience

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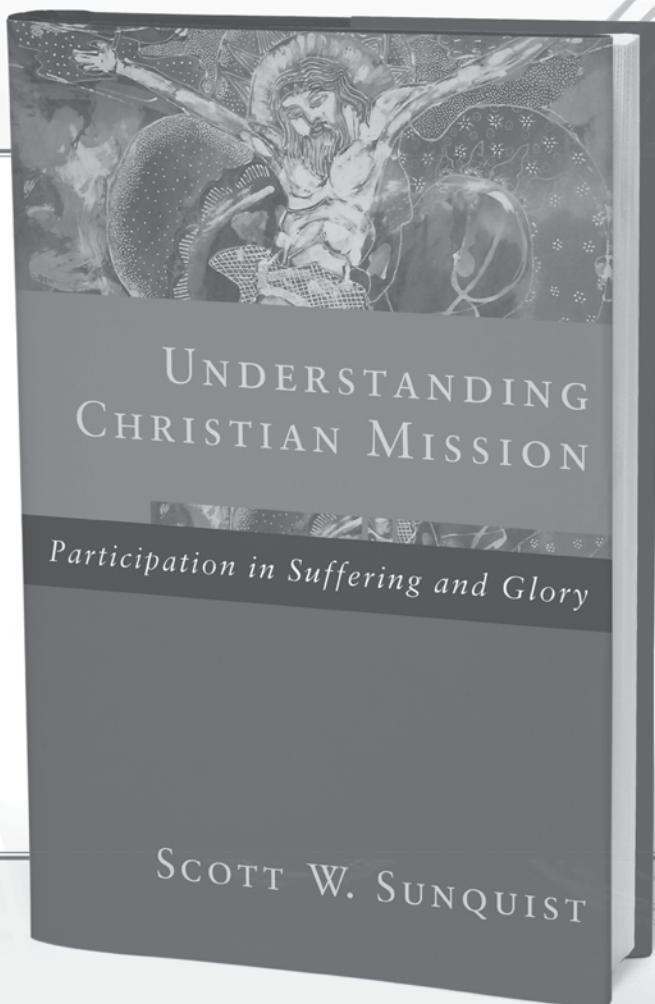
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It's not hard to recognize when someone's conscience has been defiled. I certainly saw it on Mustapha's face when we were living in a rural mountain town in North Africa. The Lord had been good to introduce us to this young follower of Christ during our first year there. I will never forget the look in his eyes that evening in our home. I had taken the liberty of inviting some Muslim men from our neighborhood to celebrate the birth of one of our children in their customary fashion—with a feast. At one point, in response to what seemed a comfortable and jovial experience eating roast lamb together, they broke into a spontaneous recitation of the Fatihah, their traditional Quranic blessing for a child. There was nothing but good will and acceptance in that room, and it was quite a bonding moment for me. But Mustapha's eyes said quite the opposite: a moral line had been crossed. His conscience had been deeply disturbed. That evening was my startling introduction to the ethical complexity of faith in a radically different socio-religious world.

Sally Dye describes this complexity as an encounter with another's "moralnet" (p. 15). Now that's not your typical label for an unreached people or region, but it's true to what greets us when we cross any cultural or religious frontier, either one across the world or among the diaspora at our doorstep. I didn't have a clue as to how Mustapha's conscience was guiding him through his traditional moralnet. All the benefits of cultural analysis and Bible study can fail to tune us into the moral maze these young believers face. Without Dye's grasp of the cultural and religious norms that comprise a moralnet, or a guiding set of propositions as outlined in Robert Priest's earlier research (p. 44), I could not fully appreciate Mustapha's struggle.

Our proper reflex is to turn to Scripture for principles to guide us in these new and distinct moral climates. The article by Wayne Dye, Sally's husband, offers a method of biblical interpretation that steers us through the straits between biblical absolutes and cultural variation, and keeps us from running aground on the sandbars of either biblical absolutism or ethical relativism (p. 5). Anyone looking for core Scriptural principles that can be maintained and developed in various cultures—and that can assist believers in these various contexts to adapt and express biblical absolutes—will find in Wayne's framework for biblical interpretation a timely tool.

One Pauline portion of Scripture, 1 Corinthians 8–10, is invariably used to address questions of culture and conscience—specifically, how new believers negotiate the

Editorial continued on p. 4

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idolatrous rituals resident within their community. It's here that Paul deals with the predicament of new believers amidst a pagan moralnet. Wayne and Sally both refer to this key text, but Kevin Higgins' exegetical study discloses how Paul handles the religious sensibilities of a new context (p. 27). Corinth is a long way from Jerusalem, and its spiritual and moral climate required an apostolic sensitivity distinct from what was required in a Jewish setting on the other side of the Mediterranean. It's here that love and liberty guide Paul in navigating individual consciences that are variously weak, clear, wounded, offended or emboldened. You'll want to read how Higgins adds new insight from Kenneth Bailey's commentary on 1 Corinthians to Paul's shaping of a "local theology" in this socio-religious context.

What's unsettling to many is the way a new believer's conscience is influenced by the non-Christian religious core of a culture (e.g., Islam's historical shaping of cultures). This can fall under the specter of syncretism and the blending of two religious worlds. It's challenging enough to sort out culture and conscience

(e.g., polygamy), but everything gets ratcheted-up in discerning how a trans-cultural religion influences conscience (e.g., ancestor worship). Again, in light of the Corinthian experience, Paul's penchant was not to make unilateral, dogmatic or collective statements about the "paganism" of Corinth, but rather to help believers honor and care for others with distinct and different religious sensibilities (e.g., consciences).

On this matter of religious sensibility, we thought we could use some perspective from Scott Sunquist's new book, *Understanding Christian Mission* (Baker Academic, 2013, see ad p. 2), and we're grateful to this publisher for permission to include an excerpt from this masterful all-in-one textbook on modern mission. Framed as a Trinitarian theological approach to the subject of mission, Sunquist shares his "eureka" of placing the interface with other cultures (contextualization) and religions (theology of religions) under the mission of the Holy Spirit. He asserts the superintending role of this third person of the Trinity in all the "points of contact" with other religions; but, as you can see from Richard's book review

(p. 48), social and cultural factors can also influence the church's selection of terminology at these same points of contact on any religious frontier.

Looking "Back to the Future"

Seizing upon the 40th anniversary of the International Congress on World Evangelization held in Lausanne, Switzerland, this year's ISFM in Atlanta (September 23-25, 2014) will look back to the future with the theme "Recasting Evangelization: The Significance of Lausanne '74 for Today and Beyond" (see ad on back cover or ijfm.org/isfm/annual.htm for details). As we celebrate the watershed event that was Lausanne '74, the focus will be on "Today and Beyond." We've got a great line-up of speakers and an affordable "all-inclusive" package—don't miss it!

In Him,



Brad Gill
Senior Editor, *IJFM*

The **IJFM** is published in the name of the International Student Leaders Coalition for Frontier Missions, a fellowship of younger leaders committed to the purposes of the twin consultations of Edinburgh 1980: The World Consultation on Frontier Missions and the International Student Consultation on Frontier Missions. As an expression of the ongoing concerns of Edinburgh 1980, the **IJFM** seeks to:

- ☞ promote intergenerational dialogue between senior and junior mission leaders;
- ☞ cultivate an international fraternity of thought in the development of frontier missiology;
- ☞ highlight the need to maintain, renew, and create mission agencies as vehicles for frontier missions;
- ☞ encourage multidimensional and interdisciplinary studies;
- ☞ foster spiritual devotion as well as intellectual growth; and
- ☞ advocate "A Church for Every People."

Mission frontiers, like other frontiers, represent boundaries or barriers beyond which we must go yet beyond which we may not be able to see clearly and boundaries which may even be disputed or denied. Their study involves the discovery and evaluation of the unknown or even the reevaluation of the known. But unlike other frontiers, mission frontiers is a subject specifically concerned to explore and exposit areas and ideas and insights related to the glorification of God in all the nations (peoples) of the world, "to open their eyes, to turn them from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God." (Acts 26:18)

Subscribers and other readers of the **IJFM** (due to ongoing promotion) come from a wide variety of backgrounds. Mission professors, field missionaries, young adult mission mobilizers, college librarians, mission executives, and mission researchers all look to the **IJFM** for the latest thinking in frontier missiology.

Biblical Absolutes and Cultural Variation

by T. Wayne Dye

The Issue

While cross-cultural disagreements about what is morally right have long been a staple of daily life for missionaries everywhere, people back home are increasingly faced with similar disagreements and the questions they raise. Such conflicts on moral issues cause interpersonal misunderstanding and friction, and often contribute to our society's claim that ethical decisions are matters of personal taste.

As my wife, Sally, and I have wrestled with these issues over many years, we have come to believe there are basic scriptural answers that alleviate many of these conflicts. In her article in this issue of the *IJFM* (pp. 15–25) “Cultural Variation in Conscience: Part of God’s Design,” Sally has written about how culture and conscience affect the way a Christian needs to obey God. The present article explains why fully mature Christians do not all obey biblical commands in the same way.

For years we thought there was only one way to obey the commands—the way we were first taught to do it.¹ As Bible translators, we had to give a people group the whole Bible. Once they had it, they would surely obey the plain meaning of its words by living as we tried to live. Although missionaries and college teachers have often taught their way as the only right way (and expected everyone to obey the commands in that way), there is considerable variation in how the commands should be followed.

One problem is that we Westerners don’t obey all commandments in the same way. We take some passages literally and obey them carefully, while ignoring other passages. We don’t literally “greet one another with a holy kiss” (Romans 16:16, NIV²). We don’t drink wine to help our digestion (1 Timothy 5:23). We don’t pray each day at 3:00 p.m., the “time of prayer” (Acts 3:1). We don’t wash the feet of others, except on rare and very special occasions (John 13:14). My wife does not wear a head covering in church while in the United States (1 Corinthians 11:2–16).³ Indeed, there are many such commands in the New Testament.⁴

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This “selective obedience” is not only a characteristic of American churches. All the Christians that we have encountered around the world have been selective at some point. This raises the question: are we following a biblical selection principle or making a mistake?

Such inconsistencies are more obvious when we look at the Old Testament, which was the “Bible” of the New Testament church. When Jesus and the Apostles quoted Scripture it was always the Old Testament. The New Testament explicitly teaches that the Old Testament is to be obeyed.

2 Timothy 3:16–17 says:

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

When Paul wrote this about the Old Testament he was agreeing with the Old Testament itself. Its commands are clearly stated, and the importance of obeying them is strongly emphasized. For instance, Deuteronomy 10:12–13 says:

And now, Israel, what does the Lord your God ask of you but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in obedience to him, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to observe the Lord’s commands and decrees that I am giving you today for your own good?

There are many such passages. Yet when we turn to the Pentateuch, we find commands that apparently were for everyone everywhere thoroughly mixed in with commands that few follow today. Leviticus 19 provides some examples. Verse 13 says, “Do not defraud or rob your neighbor.” Surely that should be followed today. The verse then goes on to say, “Do not hold back the wages of a hired man overnight.” No Christian organization in my country obeys that. Verse 18 says, “... love your neighbor as yourself,” surely a universal commandment. The very next verse says, “Do not mate different kinds of animals.... Do not wear clothing

woven of two kinds of material.” What would we tropical missionaries do without our polyester and cotton clothing?

Verse 26 says, “Do not practice divination or seek omens.” We would like to teach that to our animist friends. But what if they go on to read the next verse? It says, “Do not cut the hair at the sides of your head or clip off the edges of your beard.” Rarely do male Christian missionaries follow this command. There are many such commandments, about leaving food for gleaners, providing loans with no interest at all, leaving land lie fallow, and selling land back to its original owner after fifty years; we do not follow any of these literally today.



Key Passages on the Nature of True Obedience

We have now come to believe that the approach of Christians through the ages has been right for them. Christians of most denominations have read the Bible from their own cultural perspective and interpreted its commands in ways appropriate to their own cultures. This intuitive understanding was reasonably good in mono-cultural situations. It only fails to work when people from two different cultures interact. The missionary problem has come because we did not really understand the host people’s basis for making decisions, and so we often applied biblical teachings as if the believers in other cultures were just like us.

In the pages that follow, I hope to enable us to see how we evangelicals intuitively interpret the Bible in our own cultural situations. Once we understand the process, we can make it clear so Christians in other cultures and sub-cultures can use it in their own situations.

Can People Obey the Same Command Differently?

In two remarkable passages in the epistles, Paul showed that truly obedient Christians from different cultures would, in some cases, do quite different things. 1 Corinthians 8–10 and Romans 14 are worth careful study for cross-cultural ministry today.

Corinth was a center of idol worship. The worshipper in this context paid for an animal sacrifice, then took part in eating the meat. The rest of the meat was sold, either in the temple court or in the market place. Now the average person in that pre-industrial society could not often afford meat. With so many sacrifices being offered each day, it is likely that meat sacrificed to idols would fulfill most of the community’s demand for meat.

This situation raised a problem for believers who wanted to eat meat without taking part in idol worship. Mature Gentile believers (or believers from Jewish backgrounds) argued that eating such meat made no difference. Others, especially those newly converted from idolatrous backgrounds, felt guilty about eating such meat. For this reason, believers in Corinth asked Paul to speak to the issue. His answer was complex, and followed a discourse structure not often used today, so the steps in his reasoning are sometimes missed.

Idols Are Not Real So Eating Meat Is OK

Paul began by emphasizing love over mere knowledge, then went on to say that idols are not really supernatural beings at all.

So then, about eating food sacrificed to idols: We know that “An idol is nothing at all in the world” and that

"There is no God but one." For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as indeed there are many "gods" and many "lords"), yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live. (1 Corinthians 8:4-6)

Paul agreed that this gave freedom to those with "strong faith," those who had a truly Christian worldview in this matter. He even said in his later summary instructions to go ahead and eat any food bought in the market or served by an unbeliever. It is clear from this that there is nothing inherently wrong with eating such food, nothing that would hurt a mature Christian.

But food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do. (1 Corinthians 8:8)

Eat anything sold in the meat market without raising questions of conscience, for, "The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it." If an unbeliever invites you to a meal and you want to go, eat whatever is put before you without raising questions of conscience. (1 Corinthians 10:25-27)

If Someone Believes the Idol Is Real Then Don't Eat the Meat

There is another aspect to consider, however. Paul said that those who had a "weak conscience," i.e., did not have a biblical understanding of idols, were sinning if they ate meat offered to idols.

But not everyone possesses this knowledge. Some people are still so accustomed to idols that when they eat sacrificial food they think of it as having been sacrificed to a god, and since their conscience is weak, it is defiled.... Be careful, however, that the exercise of your rights does not become a stumbling block to the weak. For if someone with a weak conscience sees you, with all your knowledge, eating in an idol's temple, won't that person be emboldened to eat what has been sacrificed to idols? So this weak brother,

For people with a different worldview, however, that activity is a sin that can destroy their faith in Christ.

for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge. When you sin against your brothers in this way and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause him to fall. (1 Corinthians 8:7-13)

Paul saw this conflict as so critical that he urged mature Christians to be aware of who was watching and how others might interpret their actions. Cross-cultural witnesses must seek the good of others, and this includes avoiding any actions that might lead them to sin if they uncritically made the same choice.

"have the right to do anything," you say—but not everything is beneficial. "I have the right to do anything"—but not everything is constructive. No one should seek their own good, but the good of others... But if someone says to you, "This has been offered in sacrifice," then do not eat it, both for the sake of the one who told you and for the sake of conscience I am referring to the other person's conscience, not yours.... So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God. Do not cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews, Greeks or the church of God—even as I try to please everyone in every way. For I am not seeking my own good but the good of many, so that they may be saved. (1 Corinthians 10: 23, 28-29, 31-33)

Not One Right Way But Two

Here is a remarkable teaching. A specific activity (eating meat offered to idols) is right—and even encouraged—for those with one worldview and therefore a certain understanding of right and wrong. For people with a different worldview, however, that activity is a sin that can destroy their faith in Christ.

Furthermore, no one has a right to judge the actions of others.

For why is my freedom being judged by another's conscience? If I take part in the meal with thankfulness, why am I denounced because of something I thank God for? (1 Corinthians 10:29b-30)

To be sure, believers have a responsibility not to be a "stumbling block" by influencing another to do what is wrong for him. Yet, that just emphasizes the point; what is right for one can be wrong for another. That is why we can hurt others by doing something we could otherwise do in good conscience. In order to see how this could be, we need to look at just why eating food offered to idols was wrong for some people. 1 Corinthians 10:18-21 provides the clue.

Consider the people of Israel: Do not those who eat the sacrifices participate in the altar? Do I mean then that food sacrificed to an idol is anything, or that an idol is anything? No, but the sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons, not to God, and I do not want you to be participants with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons too; you cannot have a part in both the Lord's table and the table of demons.

In both Jewish and Middle Eastern Gentile cultures of that day, one worshipped a god by eating the food that had been sacrificed. Jews and Gentiles worshipped in the same way by eating a sacrifice—but with different objects of worship. When Gentiles worshipped idols they were sinning because they were choosing to worship something other than the true God. Satan and his demons are the true beneficiaries of all such rebellious worship.

Yet Paul made it clear that a Corinthian's actions while sacrificing to an idol

meant nothing in themselves, because the idol was not a deity at all. As this and all other biblical passages emphasize, an idol is nothing but a piece of dead wood or stone or gold. It is the intent thought of the worshiper that causes a given action to become worship. Worship is a matter of meaning. It is an act intended to give homage to a deity. An atheist who joins in singing in a hymn of praise at a church is not worshipping even though the Christians standing beside him singing the same hymn are. People who still believe an idol is a god when eating meat offered to it are worshipping that idol. However, if they have come to understand that the idol is nothing but a statue, they can no longer worship it because they do not believe there is a god there to worship. When they eat meat they are not sacrificing; they are merely eating meat.

We have taken time with this point because it has profound implications. The Corinthian believers were a test case for the central point of a cross-culturally valid Christian ethic. At some level every human action expresses one's relationship to God and his commandments, either in obedience or disobedience; that is its ethical and spiritual meaning. People with one worldview might be obeying God by their action, since they are not going against any of God's commandments. Someone with another worldview might be disobeying God by doing what appears to be the same thing because at the level of intention the two actions are quite different.

Note that in Paul's test case it is the more mature Christian who is free to eat the sacrificed meat. We recognize that God is gentle with new Christians, but as they mature God shows them more and better ways to obey. One might expect God's patience with new believers to be the explanation of this passage, but in this case the new converts who still believed the idol was real were more restricted in what they could do. The more mature Christians

who no longer believed in idols had greater freedom.⁵ Romans 14 provides a more general example.

Doing Right in Rome

The early church at Rome must have reflected the multi-cultural character of the city itself. Jewish and Gentile Christians had come together from many different parts of the empire. They were trying to get along, but in ways important to them they were living quite differently. Some Christians were vegetarians, perhaps to avoid eating meat offered to idols. Others ate everything. Some Christians kept the Jewish holy days; others did not. Paul's answer followed the same reasoning as he used with the Corinthians.



Accept him whose faith is weak, without quarreling over disputable matters. One person's faith allows them to eat anything, but another, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. The one who eats everything must not treat with contempt the one who does not, and the one who does not eat everything must not judge the one who does, for God has accepted them. Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To his own master, servants stand or fall. And they will stand, for the Lord is able to make them stand. One person considers one day more sacred than another; another considers every day alike. Each of them should be fully convinced in their own mind. (Romans 14:1-5)

Each Is to Do What He Is Convinced God Wants Him to Do

Each believer must follow what he thinks is right, being "fully convinced in his own mind." And he must do so without judging others, not looking down on them or condemning them for having different convictions. Those other people are also servants of God, and it is the meaning of their action as an expression of their relationship to God that really counts. In that regard, "...the Lord is able to make [them] stand." Romans 14, verses 6 through 9 make the point more clear.

Whoever regards one day as special does so to the Lord. Whoever eats meat does so to the Lord, for they give thanks to God; and whoever abstains does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God. For none of us lives for ourselves alone, and none of us dies for ourselves alone. If we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord. For this very reason, Christ died and returned to life so that he might be the Lord of both the dead and the living. (Romans 14:6-9)

In other words, each of us is continuously in relationship to God; we are never alone. He is our "Lord," our boss, our commander, the one who has a right to tell us what to do in every aspect of our lives. Every action has this dimension of relationship, and it is in this respect (and no other) that right and wrong are determined. Paul went on to say the food we eat is of no importance in itself. If, however, someone believes that he should not eat a particular food, then he is disobeying by eating that food because he is going against his perception of God's will.

I am convinced, being fully persuaded in the Lord Jesus, that nothing is unclean in itself. But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for that person it is unclean.... So whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the one who does not condemn himself by what he approves. But whoever has doubts is condemned if they eat,

because their eating is not from faith; and everything that does not come from faith is sin. (Romans 14:14, 22–23)

Don't Influence Others to Do What Is Wrong for Them

Paul made a further point about the way we interact with those who have a different understanding of what is right. We must be careful not to judge others, for “each of us will give an account of ourselves to God” (Romans 14:12). At the same time, we must not do anything that will lead others astray by doing what is right for us but not for them.

You, then, why do you judge your brother or sister? Or why do you treat them with contempt? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat. Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in the way of a brother or sister.... If your brother or sister is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy someone for whom Christ died. Therefore, do not let what you know is good be spoken of as evil. For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and receives human approval. Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification. Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. All food is clean, but it is wrong for a man to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble. It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother or sister to fall. (Romans 14:10, 13, 15-21)

If all Christians were required to act alike—what is right for one culture being right for all others—this problem would not exist. It would be impossible to lead others to stumble and fall through imitating behavior that is acceptable for another person in similar circumstances. Paul's key point is that indeed there are proper differences in behavior at some points.

These four basic principles can account for both the absolute authority of the Bible and the proper role of cultural variation.

The matter of not misleading others follows from those differences.

Paul's argument here is entirely consistent with his whole approach to working with Gentiles. God demands that all people obey the same commandments; however, in some subtle but important ways just how this obedience must be lived out is different for different peoples. How can this be, without the result being chaos? What biblical principles provide for this variation within a framework of universal commandments? In the next section, I attempt to formulate these principles.

The Way to Obey God in Any Culture

Taken together the four basic principles below can account for both the absolute authority of the Bible and the proper role of cultural variation in determining how a given command applies. These four principles lead to a three-step procedure for applying a passage.

Principle 1. All of Scripture, both Old and New Testaments, is authoritative over all people, in every age and culture.

All passages are for our benefit. No commandments can be freely disregarded; no examples are to be ignored. Scripture is much more than a guide for action; it is our “Manufacturer's Handbook” telling us all how to live.⁶

Principle 2. Though all Scripture was written for everyone, it was not written to everyone.

The author of each Scripture passage was communicating a message specifically to the original receptors, and it is this message that is the original meaning of the passage. Everyone else is an onlooker who must deduce from what was said to the original audience what God is saying to him now.

Two New Testament passages, which describe how believers today are to learn from the Old Testament, serve to clarify this principle. 1 Corinthians 10:6–11 tells of Old Testament events, which “occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did.” Hebrews 11 recounts numerous Old Testament examples that should be followed. Present day believers must decide whether the example is one that we should avoid or emulate by determining what each person did in his situation and how the Bible speaks about his actions. We then work out what those actions mean for us in our situations today. It is helpful to see how the early church interpreted the Old Testament, because the various first century churches were not all in the same situations either. They were richer or poorer, had different ethnic traditions, were more or less in danger of persecution, and differed in other significant ways as well.

Principle 3. It is the core meaning, the underlying universal teaching, of every passage of Scripture that is universally applicable in every culture. Every command and every example has a core meaning. Passages that were originally intended to be universal have a core meaning that is the same as the passage. “You shall not steal” has the same basic meaning everywhere. Most passages, however, describe an unusual situation or provide a set of instructions to particular people that are not necessarily widely applicable. In those passages, the core meaning must be derived from the situation and the passage. The core teaching is always applicable to every human being at every point in history, although the applications will be somewhat different in different situations. It is this universal core meaning which we properly call a “biblical absolute.”

This point will become clearer from the three-step procedure for discovering and then applying the core meaning.

Because the fourth principle is different in character, we will review the common process for discovering and applying the meaning of a biblical passage before introducing it. The steps are straightforward and simple. They are worth going over carefully, though, because cross-cultural application can sometimes be quite difficult.

A Three-Step Procedure for Discovering and Applying the Core Meaning

Step 1. Determine “*What did it say to them?*” Who were the intended readers, the original “receptors”? What was their situation, their context? What meaning did the human author apparently intend them to get from the communication?

Step 2. Discern “*What does it mean?*” What is the underlying universal here? What is the core meaning? How could this be phrased in more general terms? Because humans are alike in important respects (Dye, T. W. 1987, 42–43), their situation is everyone’s situation at some time or another. It is good to try to state this underlying universal meaning in plain words.

Step 3. Ask “*What does it mean to me?*” How does this universal meaning apply to us and to our hearers, friends, or colleagues here and now? This is where the rubber meets the road. This step is often the easiest to do if we are applying the meaning to ourselves or to someone like us.⁷ If the application is to a different culture, then we will have trouble discerning how to apply it. Cross-cultural workers will have to rely heavily on help from persons inside that culture to do so.

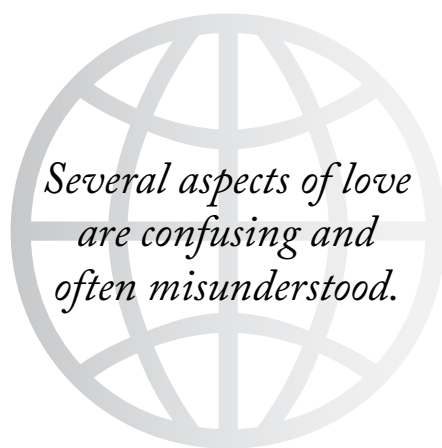
This leads us to the fourth principle.

Principle 4. Biblical commands are there to help us love God and other people.

This principle is both the most important and the one to be invoked last. Paul put its relationship to the other laws this way:

Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law. The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery,” “You shall not murder,” “You shall not steal,” “You shall not covet,” and whatever other command there may be, are summed up in this one command: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does no harm to a neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law. (Romans 13: 8–10)

The purpose of all of those commandments about inter-personal relationships is to help us know how to genuinely love others. In a sense, there are only two over-riding commandments: love God first and your neighbor as yourself. All the rest are detailed instructions about how to obey these two.



Understanding How to Love Others Is Complicated

We humans are not able to know how to love others in a righteous manner, so it is spelled out for us in the many ethical teachings of the Bible. Paul made it clear what love is in 1 Corinthians 13. Love is patient, kind, rejoices with truth, protects, trusts, hopes, perseveres, and never fails. Love is not envious, boastful, proud, rude, self-seeking, easily angered, recording wrongs, or delighting in evil.

This kind of love must be lived out every day in family relationships and in social interaction with a variety of neighbors. This kind of love is never

easy, but comes only from “a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith” (1 Timothy 1:5). It is a little easier in one’s own culture where one knows the cultural rules for loving others; it is much more difficult in another culture where the customs are different. Indeed, several aspects of love are confusing and often misunderstood.

1. Love as a universal and as a detailed teaching

Actually, there are two kinds of commandments to love others in Scripture: the universal and the detailed. People need both. We dare not delude ourselves that we could somehow simply live in love and ignore the other specific teachings found throughout both Testaments (but especially the New). God knew humans needed them, which is why they are included. We humans live in a complex and often perplexing world; we do not know the right way to love others without the guidance of the many teachings and examples of Scripture.

At the same time, we often do not know how to rightly interpret these detailed teachings, so the principle of love sheds much light on what we should do. When the applications of two commandments seem to conflict, or when two cultures come together so that it is hard to know which application fits, the love principle can show us the way.

2. Cultural variations on what is genuine Christian love

When people in a given society hear the Bible say, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” they have an idea of what that love would look like; their culturally conditioned consciences tell them what they should do. The alternative wording, “do to others as you want others to do to you” is clarifying. It is intended to give one an idea of what another person might desire. Love asks, “What would I want the other person to do for me if I were in his situation?”

That rule provides only limited guidance in other ethnic groups, however. When a person attempts to show love

to a neighbor from a distinctly different culture, the “as yourself” seldom communicates love. For example, if my wife serves a meal featuring pork to most Americans, they would see her action as love. If she served that same meal of pork to a Jew or a Muslim or a vegetarian, it would be very offensive.

We thought we were showing love to Bahinemos by taking them the twenty miles by boat to the hospital. Although several lives were saved, the hospital seemed like prison to them, especially because of their belief about death. They believed that if a person died so far away from home, the ghost would not be able to find its way back for the important burial procedures, causing catastrophic problems for the whole extended family.

Actions one person sees as loving in a given culture may actually cause harm to a neighbor within another culture. Certain actions can even cause them to stumble and lose faith. It takes research before one can know what local people in another culture would want one to do to show love in that setting. It often takes 1 Corinthians 13 love, which is patient and kind, but not proud, rude, self-seeking or easily angered.

That said, there are Scripture-based limits on how far one can go in adapting one’s behavior. We Christians cannot just do what we think is loving and ignore scriptural teaching. Instead, we must love others in ways that both communicate love and still result in obedience to all the biblical commands. The imperative to love others shows us how to apply the commands: it does not replace them.

Using the Interpretation Steps: Two Biblical Examples

Foot Washing

Before the Last Supper, Jesus washed the feet of his disciples and said,

Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you should also wash one another’s feet. I have set

When a person attempts to show love to a neighbor from a distinctly different culture, the “as yourself” seldom communicates love.

you an example that you should do as I have done for you. (John 13:14–15)

Few present day churches obey this literally. Even those churches that practice foot washing actually do so under very special circumstances and only as a symbolic act. There is a sensible reason; foot washing as originally commanded would accomplish little in a culture where people wear shoes and socks, walk on pavement, and take frequent showers.

Does this mean the command should be ignored? Of course not! The first principle of interpretation is that all Scripture is for our benefit and is to be obeyed. There is a clear and widely accepted meaning for today, a meaning that becomes obvious when following the procedure.

Let us go through the three application steps.

Step 1: What did this say to them?

Wash each other’s feet. The context of this command was a dusty city without elaborate water and sanitation systems, with many animals in the streets, and people walking barefoot or in sandals. Even if one took a bath before visiting a friend’s home, by the time he arrived his feet were dirty again. Therefore, a good host assigned a servant to wash his guest’s feet before he could comfortably recline to eat (Luke 7:44). It was this lowly, dirty, but practical task that Jesus taught the disciples to do for one another. This is the meaning to the original set of readers and hearers.

Step 2: What does this mean?

The Biblical absolute might be stated like this, “No matter how important your role in the Christian community, always be willing to do the lowliest, most disagreeable tasks to benefit a fellow believer or fellow human.”

Step 3: What does it mean to me?

The modern world certainly offers plenty of room for humble, loving service. (This is where the fourth interpretation principle fits.) There are a myriad of applications to this command. Sick and dying people, including AIDS victims, need care. Prisoners can be visited and crime victims assisted. Everyday services of cooking, cleaning, caring for babies and the elderly need attention. The list goes on. A church can only keep going because there are ushers, janitors, nursery workers, as well as preachers and teachers. Christians who do their share of these lowly tasks are fulfilling the command whether or not they also take part in the symbolic ritual of foot washing.

Muzzling the Ox

The Apostle Paul interpreted Old Testament passages this way in 1 Corinthians 9:9–10 and 1 Timothy 5:17–18. He was arguing that Christian workers deserved to be paid, and he proved his point by quoting a command in Deuteronomy 25:4, “Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain.”

How did Paul make this strange jump from oxen to people? Follow the Application Steps. (Step 1: What does it say?) “Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain.” In the 1 Corinthians passage he went on to ask, “Is it about oxen that God is concerned? Surely he says this for us, doesn’t he?” The answer to his question is no, not in the original passage. The intended meaning for the original hearers really was about the fair treatment of animals.

But Paul saw the core meaning (Step 2: What does it mean?) The core of that passage is that one who labors deserves some income for his work. (Step 3: What does it mean to me?) That concept has many applications.

He applied it to mean that people in Christian communities should pay their pastors. Furthermore, since people are more important than animals, Paul argued that this was the most important purpose of the command. Jesus also said people were the object of the passages about oxen in the Old Testament (Luke 13:15; 14:5).

This is not an obvious application of a passage on treatment of oxen, but Jesus and Paul followed the application steps for us.

Some Less Obvious Examples

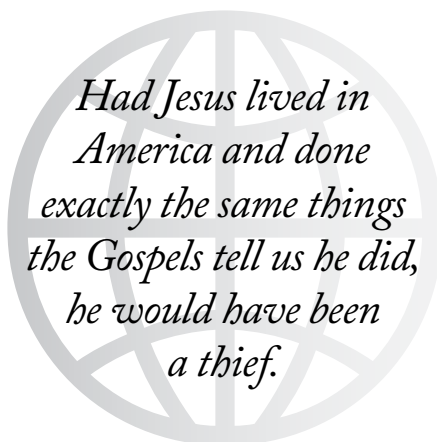
Sometimes these four interpretation principles are easy to apply. Christians today sense that they should help with the clean up and do some dirty jobs for other Christians without realizing they are “foot washing.” At other times, the process is difficult. In some cases problems arise from omitting one of the three steps to discover the core meaning. In other cases, a group of Christians feel that a particular application is very obvious. When that happens, the principle and its application become coalesced in their minds, so that the application becomes the meaning. In other words, these Christians have confused a particular cultural application with a true Biblical absolute. As a result they preclude a different application when the situation changes.

Some biblical commands are worded as universals, so the second step is unnecessary. “You shall not steal,” for instance, was a specific command to ancient Israelites, but also a universal command for all people everywhere. New Testament commands such as “be hospitable” or “be kind” were given to particular people, but the wording is already universal. Kindness, hospitality, and theft are all understood in cultures everywhere. Such universal wording leads Christians to the fallacy that the application is also clear and universal when in fact it is affected by culture. We can see this by examining how

some commands were obeyed in the New Testament, including the following example from Jesus’ life.

When Is It Stealing?

Let us look at theft, using the Three Step Application Process. (Step 1): What did this say to them? “You shall not steal.” Because it is universally worded, the universal principle is the same as the original statement, “do not take what you do not have the right to take.” Steps one and two are therefore the same. The applications, however, vary with the culture. Had Jesus lived in America and done exactly the same things the Gospels tell us he did, he



would have been a thief. He used to walk through orchards that belonged to other people and eat the fruit, and even the Pharisees did not complain.⁸ Yet if I go through an American orchard and pick the fruit I can be arrested for theft. If I defend myself in court by saying Jesus did it, I might get my name in the paper, but I won’t be let off.

The difference is in the application. (Step 3): What does it mean to me? Jesus lived in a culture that, through the Pentateuch, had defined public rights as including picking fruit, as long as it was eaten on the spot. Since his government gave Jesus the right to take the fruit, he was not stealing. My culture does not give a person the right to eat fruit from someone else’s

orchard. I would have to ask permission to take the fruit, or it would be stealing.

Some careful research may need to go into understanding what people in a particular culture have the right to take. Many people groups in Irian Jaya have very different rules about what a person has a right to take. *The Pineapple Story* (Gothard and Koning 1978) describes cross-cultural conflict as a result of different rules about the ownership of crops. If the missionary had asked, “Who has the right to take the pineapples?” and believed what he was told, he would have avoided years of misunderstanding that undermined his witness. The Irianese in his story had a clear rule, “The person who plants them eats them.” Garden produce is then used generously to build obligation for future leadership. Owners may put a curse on their garden to protect it from thieves by calling on a higher power, usually an ancestor. The people of that community had no experience or understanding of wage labor. The missionary assumed the protocol of wage labor, “If I pay for the labor, I own whatever is produced by that labor.”

Cultural Definitions of Hospitality

The command to “practice hospitality” (Romans 12:13) is understood everywhere, yet not in the same way. When my daughter and I visited the Tboli people of Mindanao, Philippines in 1974, the Christians provided us with gifts and hospitality which added up to a month’s wages. Their culture sets a very high standard of hospitality, and this is the level of kindness they felt they should show to friends of their beloved translator.

As missionaries we are often the recipient of Christian hospitality in the United States. Many people have opened their homes and shown great kindness to us, though we were strangers. No one, however, has come close to giving us a month’s wages in hospitality. We don’t expect such a thing in North American culture. The universal

command must have a culturally appropriate expression.

Cultural Standards of Generosity

The biblical command (Step 1) says to “be generous and willing to share” (1 Timothy 6:18). The core meaning is clearly the same (Step 2). But the application is very different for an Isneg villager in the northern Philippines than it is for us (Step 3). If an Isneg came into his village with a basket of pineapples from his garden, and gave away two-thirds of them, he would be considered stingy. The cultural standard is to give away three-quarters. If I returned from the grocery store and gave away two-thirds of my groceries to my neighbors, they would also be concerned—about my sanity.

We live in different cultures, with different standards and systems for sharing. The command is universal, but the application is culture specific. It is best to consistently use the three application steps and teach people in other cultures to do so.

Holy Kisses

Another example of contextualized obedience is the way various cultures follow the instructions to (Step 1) “Greet one another with a holy kiss” (Romans 16:16, 1 Corinthians 16:20, 2 Corinthians 13:12, 1 Thessalonians 5:26, 1 Peter 5:14). (Step 2) Greet one another in a warm, loving upright way. When people of different cultures follow through (Step 3), some cultures actually kiss. Others substitute an embrace, a warm handshake, mutual bowing, or even just a friendly voice and a smile. However it is done, love, respect, and affection are communicated in a wholesome way.

Care for the Elderly—the Western Way

Take another example, the command to “honor your father and your mother” (Steps 1 and 2). The early church clearly saw that honoring one’s parents included taking care of them when they were old. The church cared for old people who had no children to care

I once heard a Fijian Senator publicly say that Western societies are “primitive” because we typically leave much of the care of the elderly to public agencies.

for them. Jesus criticized the Pharisees for worming their way out of parental obligation by giving to God what should have gone to parents (Matthew 15:1-9). I once heard a Fijian Senator publicly say that Western societies are “primitive” because we typically leave much of the care of the elderly to public agencies. In her view, old people should be cared for by their families, and should live with them. Certainly her approach is closer to what was done by the early church.

We American Christians, including most elderly ones, see the issue differently (Step 3: What does it mean to me?). We see the core meaning as essentially unchanged, but say that by fostering public policies that do provide for social security and community services, we are in fact fulfilling our obligation. As many Americans perceive things, our homes have no room for an extra family member, nor do older people want to be dependent on their families. Only when other arrangements are inadequate do we expect families to take in elderly parents. This is an example of obedience that fits the cultural context of some people in the United States.

Should a Christian Smoke?

In the above examples, a tribal culture has held to a stronger realization of a commandment than Americans. Lest we conclude that the issue is simply an American lack of spirituality, here is a different example. Like many American evangelicals, my wife and I do not smoke. We have taken the command in 1 Corinthians 6:19–20 to mean that we should care for our bodies. We know that smoking increases the risk of disease. These days many Americans agree with this, to the point they are willing to make life difficult for smokers in order to get cigarette smoke completely out of offices and public places.

The Bahinemo Christians with whom we spent many years in Papua New Guinea were eager to obey God and his commands. We taught them to go to God’s Word rather than to us for the answers to their life questions. We would only be there a limited number of years and wanted them to depend on Jesus for help. Much to our embarrassment among missionary co-workers, they saw no command against smoking in the Bible and had no conviction that it was a sin. This was in a context of God clearly convicting them of other sins in their lifestyle.

Bahinemos knew that the Bible commands us to care for our bodies, but they saw no relationship between smoking and disease. The concept of a slow incremental cause and the statistical concept of risk are totally foreign to their worldview. Unless we could show them a cause and effect relationship, they were not ready to accept our idea that the strange lung diseases and coughs they had were the result of smoking. Furthermore, locally grown tobacco provides one of their few pleasures in a world full of insects and discomfort. It is also one of the few ways they can afford to provide hospitality to visitors, a very high value. Only a few who were very ill from lung diseases quit smoking for medical reasons, despite my efforts to teach on this point.⁹

During the early years of the church we could simply have told them, “You cannot smoke and be a Christian.” After all, we were their initial evangelists and the source of all they knew about these new teachings. To do so would not have tied the teaching to Scripture, however. It would have convinced them that there are some things for which you do not go to Scripture at all. The result would have been a lessened willingness to submit to God’s Word as the primary source for knowing his will. It might easily have

increased their susceptibility to every self-styled “prophet” who came along.

Conclusion and Summary

This article has attempted to explain why it is appropriate for Christians to interpret and apply biblical teachings in order to make them more appropriate to their own cultures. Down through the centuries, believers have naturally made such applications without realizing it. Indeed, their perceptions of what Scripture was asking of them were so molded by their own cultures that the principles and their cultural applications were intertwined. The Epistles in particular teach us that a Christian community should come to its own understanding of how the Bible should be applied. Even if believers in every society were fully mature, there would still be differences in how they obey the Bible.

We presented four principles for determining how a command applies.

1. All of Scripture, both Old and New Testaments, is authoritative over all people, in every age and culture.
2. There is an original set of readers and hearers to which every passage was addressed.
3. The core meaning, of every command of Scripture is applicable in all cultures; this is the true biblical absolute.
4. The command to love others as you love yourself states the purpose of the other commandments, and thus provides a way to sort out cases of cultural and other conflicts in interpretation.

A Three-Step Application Process helps one find the core meaning and how it applies in any particular situation.

Step 1. What did this say to them? (Original meaning)

Step 2. What does it mean? (Core meaning)

Step 3. What does it mean to me? (Personal meaning or to my friends in another culture)

These Four Application Principles and the Three-Step Application Process reveal the core meaning of a command. **IJFM**

Endnotes

¹ It wasn't that I thought I was succeeding in living righteously, but I thought if I were to succeed it would be by truly doing what I had been taught was right living for everyone.

² All Biblical references in this article are noted from the New International Version.

³ Indians and Africans often insisted that she wear a head covering in church after we let them know we wanted to do what is right.

⁴ See *The Other Side*, Nov-Dec. 1975 for these and other examples.

⁵ Nevertheless mature Christians were being asked to give up that freedom for the sake of some new believers.

⁶ For a more thorough discussion of this concept and its hidden complexities, see Geisler 1989. The approach I am taking could be seen as a variant of “Graded Absolutism” (Geisler, 113-132).

⁷ On the other hand, if it is written to us, and conflicts with something our culture approves of or values, we will have a difficult time seeing the real meaning of that command and applying it.

⁸ Jesus was breaking the law only if he did it on the Sabbath. (Mark 11:12-33). At his trial the Pharisees did not raise this as a problem.

⁹ Recently increasing numbers of the people of this village have come to realize the relationship between smoking and health, with the result that many have stopped smoking.

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Cultural Variation in Conscience: Part of God's Design

by Sally Folger Dye

Why 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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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, NIV¹). 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

Unfortunately, modern missionaries have generally adopted this view of the conscience.

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.² 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

T*his problem has undermined cross-cultural communication of the gospel since the first century AD.*

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.

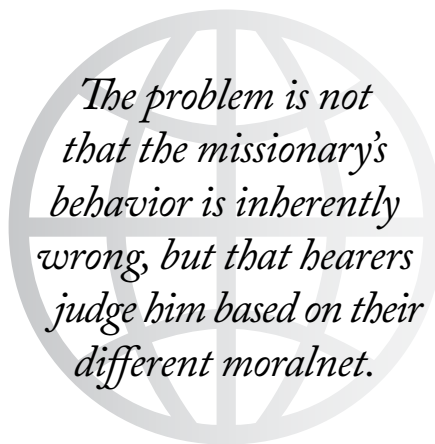
This close tie between social customs and expressions of love and respect helps to explain why the pastors in my husband's seminar would accuse the missionaries of not loving one another. Although these pastors had been Christians for years and had had extensive interaction with Westerners, often having 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,

They cannot understand why the missionaries refuse to join them in what they see as “God’s laws” of love.

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.

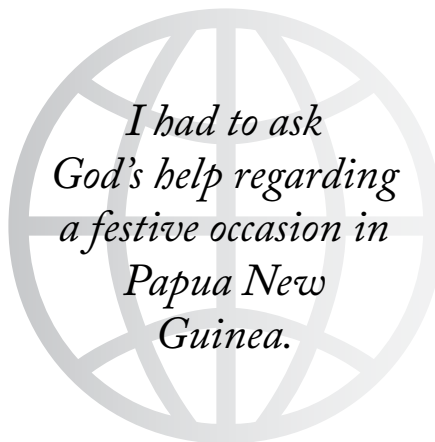
I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible.... I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. (1 Corinthians 9:19, 23)

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

Designing 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

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

² 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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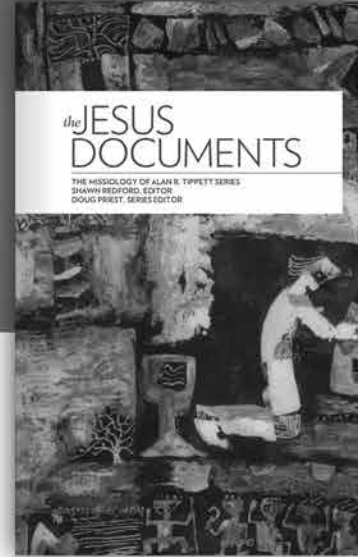
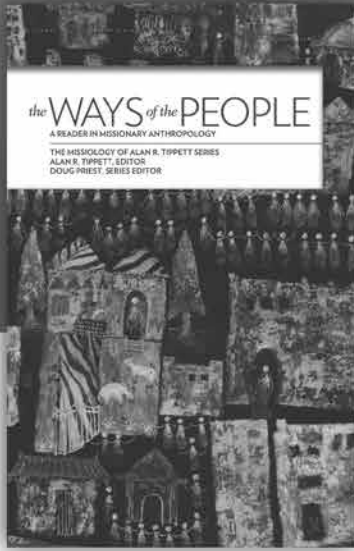
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At Table in the Idol's Temple?

Local Theology, Idolatry, and Identification in 1 Corinthians 8–10

by Kevin Higgins

Should believers in Jesus remain involved in religious activities and rituals of their religion of birth after coming to faith in Jesus as Lord? The question continues to spark vigorous interaction among missionaries and missiologists who regularly discuss issues in so-called “insider movements.” Drawing especially on Kenneth Bailey’s recent work on 1 Corinthians, I explore below what 1 Corinthians 8–10 may have to teach us regarding this particular question. I conclude by reflecting on the implications of these passages for “insider movements,” or what I prefer to call “movements to Jesus” that remain engaged in the socio-religious dimensions of their birth culture.

Three Scenes

In order to set the context for what follows, I begin with three brief scenes from events in my own ministry.

Scene 1: Local Theology

I was in Kenya recently helping our African leadership as they conducted a one-week training event for potential new missionaries from East Africa. During one standard exercise participants are presented with a list of biblical commands and then asked whether a given command is universal (to be obeyed in the same way, in every place, at every time, in every period of history, by all people) or context-specific (commands that, while conveying a universal principle, may be obeyed differently in different contexts).

One typical, generally easy-to-answer, example is the apostolic command for believers to “greet one another with a holy kiss” (Rom. 16:16; 1 Cor. 16:20; 2 Cor. 13:12; 1 Thess. 5: 26; 1 Pet. 5:14). Christians tend to assume that this (frequent) apostolic command is not to be obeyed literally—witness the fact that no one kissed me when I arrived at the conference. We seem to make such decisions almost automatically, without being aware of the process by which we make them.

Kevin Higgin has been involved with Global Teams as a missionary since 1990. He developed a work in a majority Muslim country that has resulted in creative evangelism among eight languages, four of which have emerging people movements. As International Director of Global Teams, Kevin now recruits, trains, and coaches pioneer missionaries.

Another example, one that usually promotes lively discussion, concerns church leadership. For example, Paul's greeting to the Philippian church includes a reference to "the bishops and deacons" (Phil. 1:1, KJV). Thus, we can safely conclude that there were plural "bishops" in the church at Philippi. As participants (many of whom were Anglican) discussed this issue, they found that their assumptions about church polity had influenced their reading of Scripture. In particular, it had blinded them to the fact that Paul was addressing multiple bishops in a single congregation. This is strikingly different from the later development in which a sole bishop is now appointed over many congregations.

The point of such an exercise is not primarily to help participants find the "right" answer, but rather to make them sensitive to the fact that we all engage in the process of "local theology"—and that we usually do so without being aware of it, applying and interpreting Scripture in the light of our context and presuppositions. The more we become aware of this reality, the better we can (hopefully) allow Scripture to speak freely, unshackled from our prior assumptions about what it means in a given situation. Whether we admit it or not, "local theologizing" is something in which biblical disciples of Jesus engage all the time.¹

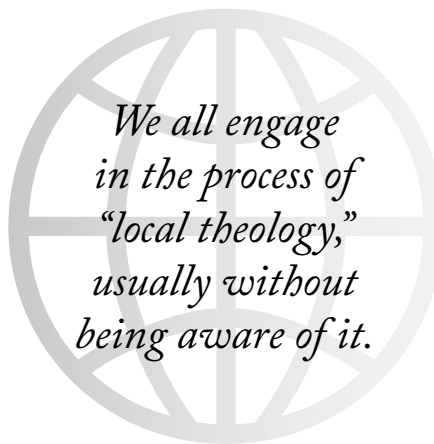
Scene 2: Idolatry

At another training event in Africa, we gathered together key leaders engaged in ministry among Muslims. One session focused on the controversy raging in some circles about the origins and meaning of Allah, the Arabic word for God. Afterward a brother in Christ came up to me and said, "Allah is not a god. Allah is a moon demon and to use that word is idolatry." Although I mentioned that every Arabic translation of the Bible uses "Allah" for the God of the Bible (and has for hundreds of years), and that Arabic-speaking Christians wor-

ship Allah as the God and Father of Jesus Christ, nothing I said could persuade my brother that using this word was not idolatrous. In part, the issue was a linguistic and historical one. At a deeper level, however, it could also be that there were much more fundamental differences between us about what constitutes idolatry.

Scene 3: Identification

Every year I take part in a face-to-face gathering of men and women who hold greatly differing views on issues of contextualization among Muslims, in particular so-called "insider movements." In addition to these annual meetings, the group also discusses various topics via an e-mail forum.



One topic that comes up regularly is that of identity, in particular the extent to which new disciples (in any context) continue to maintain their prior religious identity (or see at least part of their identity as including an understanding of themselves as "Muslim," for example). The discussions focus on different aspects of such a self-description (theological, worldview, practices, social belonging, culture, etc.) and the degree to which continued "identification" with one's social and religious birth community is in keeping with one's new "identification," both as a disciple of Jesus and as a member of what we might call our spiritual "new-birth community." Because our discus-

sion group is made up of missionaries, missiologists, and Muslims who have come to faith in Jesus (both those who continue to refer to themselves as Muslims and those who do not), Scripture is often one of the major sources cited for the opinions we each express or question.

1 Corinthians 8–10 and Potential Contributions for Local Theology, Idolatry, and Identification

About two years ago, a lot of discussion took place between members of the e-mail forum about the relevance of Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians 8–10 to the question of "identity" (in particular, whether it supports the idea that a believer in Jesus could take part in some of the traditions and rituals of the religious community of his birth). In this case, the group's specific concern was whether a Muslim who has come to trust and believe in Jesus as Lord and Savior could still pray at the mosque or participate in other Islamic practices. Could (or should) such a disciple continue some level of identification with the religion of his birth? If so, to what extent?

After an initial period of intense discussion, the forum moved to other topics. Then, after several months the identity question resurfaced. Both times this topic has come to the fore, I have read the various posts and wanted very much to engage in the discussion. But each time I began to write something, I found myself hesitating, primarily because I did not want to simply jump to conclusions about the text and what I thought it might be saying. So, over the past two to three years since the first series of e-mails about this section of 1 Corinthians, I have taken up a more focused study of this epistle. My study has taken three primary forms.

In 2011, I was privileged to take part in a week-long study of 1 Corinthians

with a group of colleagues. We used the (inductive) manuscript study method and worked through the text as a group. I had my Greek text open throughout the week for reference. The mutual learning and insights of that week have provided some of the foundations for my conclusions in this paper.

In late 2012, I resumed thinking about the postings about 1 Corinthians written by members of the e-mail forum referred to above. Those discussions and questions have stimulated my own thinking and have also shaped my approach to this paper. I found some of my assumptions challenged, and realized I needed to examine Paul's thinking in 1 Corinthians 8–10 in even more depth. That led to a study of what scholars have said about this passage, specifically the recent commentaries by Kenneth Bailey and Gordon Fee.² Bailey's commentary proved particularly helpful to my thinking, especially his insights into Paul's central purpose in writing as reflected in the structure of his letter.

The Place of 1 Corinthians 8–10 in the Context of the Whole Letter

Some New Testament scholars have raised questions about the composition of these two letters to the church at Corinth. Specifically, some have speculated that the two canonical letters may in fact be pieced together from several other letters, a task that might have been undertaken either by Paul or by a later editor.

Kugelman, in his *Introduction to I Corinthians* (1968: 254ff), and Ruef, in his short commentary on the same book (1972:70), both articulate well some of the various expressions of this view. Although Ruef disagrees with the view that the material has been inserted, he does see 1 Corinthians 9 as a digression in Paul's thinking, and not as part of his main argument.

Most of the scholarship on 1 Corinthians has depended upon thematic assessments of the material to ascertain the flow of Paul's thinking. And the results

How are Corinthian followers of Jesus to live their lives as believers in the context of the religious and social life of their community?

have led to a wide variety of proposed outlines for the structure of his thought in the letters. I would suggest that this lack of consensus about Paul's discourse and flow of logic also contributes to the tendency to assume that multiple letters have been pieced together.

It is here that Bailey's work diverges from that of earlier commentators and where his approach suggests an important insight. Bailey argues that, far from being like fabric stitched together from previously disconnected pieces, Paul's letter to the Corinthians is very much the result of an intentional and detailed design. He finds this not only in the overall structure of the letter but also carefully woven into the smaller units as well.

As fascinating as a detailed exploration of all these points might be, they are beyond the scope of this article. Instead I will focus on the central premise of Bailey's discussion of the overall structure of the letter, for it provides a crucial and strategic insight into chapters 8 through 10 of 1 Corinthians as they relate to Paul's thinking.

In most Western-based discourse, we are familiar with a linear flow of logic. Arguments begin from one point and then build step-by-step to a conclusion that comes as a climax at the end of an essay, sermon, article, or other form of communication. It is this assumption of linear logic that seems to undergird the commentaries of modern scholars as they search for Paul's argument in his first letter to Corinth.

However, Bailey argues that Paul's thinking and the flow of his logic in 1 Corinthians is built upon what he refers to as a "ring structure" (2011: 50ff.). In a ring structure, the climax (the central and most important point or theme) does not come at the end, but in the

center of the written or oral discourse. Other themes are built before and after that central theme in something like mirror images of one another.³

Bailey's full commentary (2011: 33ff) includes both a detailed description of this ring structure in 1 Corinthians and a rich collection of background material and examples that demonstrate how common this literary structure actually was. I will be content here to merely give an overview of the most pertinent aspects of his outline of the letter.

The outer "rings" are the brief introductions and conclusions of the letter (2011: 55 and 478). The next-to-outer ring opens with the Crucified Lord, but closes with the Risen Lord (pages 65ff and 419ff.). After that, the next ring "in" has to do with the living out of community life as men and women (1 Corinthians chapters 5–7 and 11–14; Bailey, pp. 153ff. and 293ff.).

A chart of this ring structure—with Bailey's chapter and verse breaks for 1 Corinthians—looks like the one on the next page.

I have highlighted what is at the center of these rings, which in ring structure is the most important point for the author. The center, according to Bailey, is the section dealing with what he calls Christian and Pagan. This is the section I am considering in this article: chapters 8–10 (2011: 227ff.).

These chapters deal with critical matters for the Corinthian followers of Jesus. Specifically, how are they to live their lives as believers in the context of the religious and social life of their community—a community in which they had lived prior to their faith in the gospel, and in which they still live after coming to faith, but now of course as believers.

Figure 1. Kenneth Bailey's "Ring" Description

Theme	Verses		
1. Greeting/Prayer	1:1–9		
2. The Gospel: the Cross ⁴	1:10–4:16		
3. Men/Women (in humanity)	4:17–7:40		
4. Christian and Pagan		8:1–11:1	
5. Men/Women (in the Community)			11:2–14:40
6. The Gospel: the Resurrection			15:1–58
7. Concluding Notes			16:1ff.

I will focus on three (previously stated) aspects found in these three chapters: local theology, idolatry, and identification.

1 Corinthians 8–10 and Local Theology

Paul takes up issues in the letter to the Corinthians that are not new issues for the church of his day. In particular, he gives considerable space to questions of sexuality and food offered to idols, both of which were specifically mentioned in another letter, the letter written by the elders in Jerusalem as mentioned in Acts 15.

And yet Paul does not merely cite the Acts 15 letter, or the decision of the Jerusalem Council, as he addresses the topic in Corinth. I believe he applies the principles underlying the Acts 15 decision in a way that differs from what the letter actually instructed Gentiles to do. In other words, Paul is engaging in local theologizing. For this reason, this study of 1 Corinthians 8–10 may serve to help us to do the same in other contexts.

1 Corinthians 8–10 and Idolatry

The major issue that Paul takes up in chapters 8–10 is the question of food offered to idols (and the closely related issue of idolatry itself). By paying close attention to what is—or is not—said about idolatry, we will be able to more clearly address the question of what does—and does not—constitute idolatry in other situations today (including,

but by no means limited to, questions arising in connection with movements to Jesus in Muslim contexts.)

1 Corinthians 8–10 and Identification

By “identification” I am referring to the degree to which believers in Jesus continue to identify with their cultural, social, and religious birth communities. Some have referred to this using the word “contextualization,” but I see that word as being more related to issues faced by “outsiders,” people who have come from elsewhere to live faithfully for Christ and to share his Gospel in a new cultural context.

Identification may not be a perfect word, but I have elected to use it for two reasons. First, Bailey actually uses the term in his commentary. Second, it has a link to the concept of identity, which, in my mind, provides a helpful balance to some of the focus of the discussions about how disciples can and should live in the context of their birth communities. Many of these discussions have focused more on issues of what I would call “belief” (doctrine, worldview, etc.) or “behavior” (specific actions, etc.). Identification speaks to the question of “belonging” (to whom do I belong and of what am I a part?). Paul certainly addresses matters of belief and behavior, and not just belonging, in this letter to the Corinthians. However, the fact that what I would call “identification issues”

are close to his mind is seen in the structure of his thinking.

I have already described Bailey's argument, namely that 1 Corinthians 8–10 comprise the center of the letter's rings and, as such, reveal the central theme of his discourse. Within that centerpiece, there is a further sub-structure, a smaller ring within a ring: chapter 9 (which is the center of chapters 8–10).⁵ I now turn to a more detailed treatment of each of these three topics.

“Local Theology” in Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians

My thesis in this section is that Paul's discussion of food offered to idols in his letter to the Corinthians is a great example of “Local Theology.” Theology becomes local when someone applies a previously revealed principle to a new context in such a way that the application of the principle differs from how it was originally applied. Although the principle is the same, the actions or behaviors that characterize how one is to obey the principle may be different in the specifics in another context. This is local theologizing, at least in the somewhat limited way I am using it in this article.⁶

Though it is increasingly popular to speak of local theology and local theologizing, it might be more controversial in conservative theological circles to suggest that we see such a process within the Scriptures. I am convinced that such a view of the inspired Scriptures in no way compromises a high view of inspiration and inerrancy. I am also convinced that such a view will enable us to find fresh insight into how to address new theological, ethical, and practical questions that arise in the life of the Body of Christ as it continues to emerge in new, previously unreached, cultures and peoples.

1 Corinthians, read in the light of Acts 15, is not the only text to which we might look in order to explore how an ongoing process takes place—a process that reflects upon and applies the Acts

15 letter in the life of the growing movement to Jesus in the New Testament. Though 1 Corinthians only addresses sexuality and food and idols, Acts 15 also “settled” the issue of the Gentiles and circumcision.

And yet clearly the issues continued to be controversial, as we see in Galatians⁷ (circumcision and table fellowship), Romans (circumcision and table fellowship), Colossians (circumcision, food rules), and Revelation 2:14 (specifically food offered to idols).

I will focus on Corinth and Acts 15 here, but that brief list helps us see that believers in different contexts continued to wrestle with the issues that had arisen early in the movement described in Acts. I find quite interesting several facets in Paul’s approach to the issue of food and idols, especially when I read 1 Corinthians with Acts 15 in the background:

1. Paul never mentions the letter itself, and makes no mention of the Council and its decision. Thus he does not appear to be content with merely citing an authority and thereby settling the matter. Instead, it seems that he is applying a principle in a new context.
2. Paul makes no reference to strangled meat and blood.
3. Paul’s instructions in 1 Corinthians 8–10 are not the same as the Council’s instructions in Acts 15. Whereas the Council said not to eat food offered to idols, Paul gives criteria for times when it is allowed, and why. 1 Corinthians 8:8–9 and 10:14ff summarize the two criteria. Food offered to idols may be eaten if:
 - a. the conscience of another brother or sister in Christ is not harmed, and,
 - b. there is no idolatry.

When Bailey discusses this difference between Paul and the Acts 15 Council he rightly observes that the elders in Jerusalem could not have foreseen the context of, nor the situation faced by, the

Paul’s instructions in 1 Corinthians 8–10 are not the same as the Council’s instructions in Acts 15.

church in Corinth (2011: 233). Kugelman describes that situation as one in which all meat sold in the market was leftover from one sacrifice or another, a context vastly different from the one in Jerusalem (1968: 266). Fee compares the overwhelmingly Gentile population and the twenty-six different sacred sites in the city of Corinth with the one Jewish synagogue (1987: 3). These references are powerful evidence of the pagan context in Corinth that the Jerusalem Council did not apparently have in view.

Conclusions Regarding Corinthians and Local Theologizing

In light of the above, I conclude the following:

1. Paul’s argumentation in 1 Corinthians 8–10 is an example of local theologizing.
2. As such, Paul gives a different specific command relative to food offered to idols. Rather than repeat the blanket command not to eat such food (as found in Acts 15), he argues instead that, generally speaking, it is perfectly fine to eat such meat (8:1–6), and instead addresses situations in which it would not be permissible.
3. Paul is specifically concerned about both charity and idolatry. Thus, eating food offered to idols is forbidden if a) it breaks the law of charity by wounding the conscience of another brother (8:7–13) or b) it involves idolatry (10:14–22).

This may be Paul’s attempt to apply what he saw as the principles underlying the Acts 15 decision, or what he saw as the intention of the elders in Jerusalem. Regardless, it is clear that Paul has reinterpreted that command to fit a new context—an example of local theologizing. The fact that we find

it in Scripture itself should lead us to study in greater depth how the biblical material engages in this process, and thus to develop a biblically based model or process for local theologizing in our own ministries.

“Idolatry” in Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians

Paul, in his words to the Corinthian church in 1 Corinthians 8–10, describes three contexts in which eating meat offered to idols took place. So far we have referred to two of those settings and the counsel Paul gave:

1. Concerning meat purchased in the market: “Eat anything sold in the market and do not ask questions” (10:25). This seems to be Paul’s fundamental position, based on his opening argument on the issue of food offered to idols in 8:1ff.
2. Concerning food served in someone else’s home *if* someone with a sensitive conscience points out the fact that the meat has been offered to idols: “Do not eat it” (for the sake of the other’s conscience; 10:27ff.). This seems to be Paul’s fundamental reason to *limit* the freedom of the believer to eat anything, even food offered to idols—the principle of *charity*.

The third context Paul addresses concerning the eating of meat offered to idols is a setting in which the believer is actually sitting at table in an idol’s temple (8:10). According to Fee, Paul’s concern in this case is not that there are believers in an idol’s temple, nor that believers are eating there. His concern is that other believers with weaker consciences might see this taking place and be pressured by “stronger” believers to try eating meat that had been sacrificed to idols, leaving “weaker” believers feeling guilty

and with a wounded conscience. Fee suggests that these weaker believers struggle because they are still “accustomed” to equating an idol with a god, the spiritual being symbolically represented by the idol (see 1 Corinthians 8:7; Fee 1987: 14).

Fee makes the case that both types of believers are actually present in the temple during the meal. This is why the “weak” can see the “strong.” However the difference is that the “weak” believers, although present in the temple location, do not feel they can eat the meat that has been offered because they are accustomed to the connection between the idol, the spiritual being, and the ritual in which the food has been offered. The “strong” believers have come to “know” that the idol is in fact nothing, and thus feel free not only to be present at the meal, but also to eat the sacrificed meat. (For Fee’s very helpful exegesis of this passage, see his book *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, published in 1987: 386–387).

Paul’s counsel, however, is not that they should all cease eating or attending because such actions are inherently wrong. Instead, Paul is directing the “strong” to be concerned for the weak and to not pressure them. In other words, Paul appeals to the principle of charity.

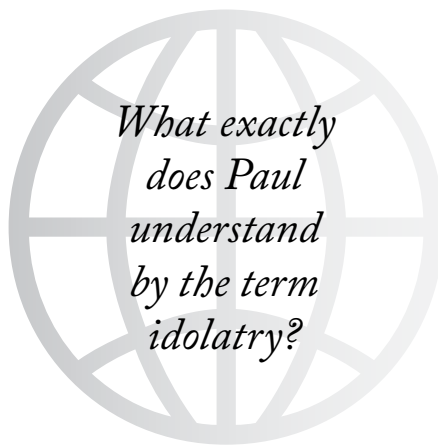
More needs to be said. What does this begin to suggest about idolatry?

First, Paul is very clearly and adamantly opposed to idolatry. His argument in chapter 10:1–22 is very clear. What is offered to idols by the Gentiles is offered to demons, and Paul wants no involvement with demons on the part of the believers.

The fact that he links this to the worship of demons, and to Israel’s history of unfaithfulness in the wilderness, points to just how serious this issue is for Paul. Idolatry is not simply a theological or even a faith issue; it actually opens up the believer to demonic realities.

And yet, 1 Corinthians 8:10 shows us a believer sitting at table in an idol temple eating what was offered there (eating what had been offered to demons according to 1 Corinthians 10:20). Paul’s counsel is not based on the fact that this is idolatry, but on the fact that it wounds another believer’s conscience. The same is true for eating such food in a home. Paul’s main argument, again, is that the believer is free to eat anything at all, even food that had been offered to idols (demons).

Before moving on, it is worth asking what Paul is referring to by mentioning that a believer might be sitting at table in an idol’s temple. And here the commentators do not agree.



Kugelman sees the act of sitting in the temple as an abomination, an instance of idolatry in and of itself as the group meals held in temples after sacrifices were closely connected to idol worship (1968: 266). He assumes Paul’s reference to be sarcastic, that Paul does not seriously assume that a believer would be sitting in the temple to eat (1968: 269).

I agree with Kugelman that the meals in the temple were connected in some way to the ceremony during which the meat was offered to an idol. Bailey describes the scene as similar to a restaurant being run by the temple (2011: 230), and Fee has a similar description

referring to the location as a temple dining hall (1987: 386).

Because Bailey does not address any possible connection to idolatry (it is not a central point in his commentary), I hesitate to say too much about his viewpoint on the matter. Fee does address this issue and clearly states that the meals served in the temple dining halls were cultic meals (1987: 386). Thus the believers Paul is addressing were attending a cultic meal, a religious event connected in some way to the worship of another god in that god’s temple.

That said, there is one point in Kugelman’s argument that I do not find convincing, namely his view that Paul is merely sarcastically depicting a hypothetical situation. It would perhaps be best to read Paul’s words as a straightforward description of a situation similar to the ones he’d already mentioned (eating such meat at home or in the market). If Paul refers to believers eating in the temple, it seems obvious that some of the Corinthian believers were buying meat in the market, being offered sacrificed meat in homes, *and* eating food offered to idols in the temple itself (also see Fee 1987: 385).

This raises the following question: What exactly does Paul understand by the term “idolatry”? While he never actually defines the term, we can gain a picture by piecing together several of his comments in 1 Corinthians 8–10.

First, Paul clearly does not see the mere act of eating meat offered to idols as inherently idolatrous, otherwise he would have condemned it; after all, like all devout Jews, Paul abhorred idolatry. Whether believers purchase meat offered to idols in the market, or have it served to them in another person’s home, Paul’s only guideline is that they follow the way of charity, so as not to offend the conscience of a weaker brother or sister.

Second, Paul not only allows believers to eat food offered to idols, he permits it in the temple itself. Note, however, that

although such meals were intimately connected to the actual sacrifices, the setting for which Paul expresses permission is clearly not the actual ritual of sacrifice itself, but rather the meal following the sacrifice. This leads to another point.

Third, for Paul, the second major limit or boundary that a believer is not to cross is actual communion with a demon (the first is wounding a brother's conscience by not exercising charity). Paul takes up this concern in chapter 10 where the altar or table of the demon is compared to the table of Lord. We might say that the bottom line then is "no worship of, or attempt to commune with, or pray to, an idol, or rather, the demon behind the idol."

This seems to suggest a definition of idolatry:

seeking (by intention and action on the part of a believer in Jesus) to commune with, placate, worship, and obey a spiritual being or entity other than God.

While I am sure this can and should be further refined, I suggest that this accurately summarizes Paul's thinking in 1 Corinthians.⁸

Paul's position on this topic is admittedly complex. I believe that he is trying to help the Corinthians see that mere participation in an act or ceremony doesn't tell the whole story when it comes to idolatry. For some, a given act may not be idolatrous at all; for others, past connections and experiences may, through their participation, pull them into a spiritual experience with a spiritual being other than God. This, I believe, is the force of Paul's argument in chapters 8 to 10 and his primary concern. Rather than being pressured to act contrary to their consciences, the first type of believer (the "stronger" believers) should protect and help the second type (the "weaker" believers).

Conclusions Concerning "Idolatry" in Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians
To summarize, Paul has two concerns relative to food offered to idols: 1) be-

Mere participation in an act or ceremony doesn't tell the whole story when it comes to idolatry.

lievers must be careful to exhibit charity or love; and 2) they must avoid—indeed, flee—idolatry. If idolatry is understood to be the intentional act of seeking to connect with a spiritual being other than God, and yet Paul allows believers to eat at the table in the temple, then Paul is extending a pretty wide circle of grace to those believers who might be seen sitting at table in the temple in such a setting.

Paul clearly seems to assume that there are believers eating at the table in the idol's temple. He also seems to assume that their intention is not idolatrous, that they are not seeking to commune with demons. However, his urgent warnings about idolatry in the same chapter indicate that this situation represents a fine line and that he is, in fact, very concerned about the ever-present danger of falling back into demon worship.

"Identification" in Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians

In many discussions among missionaries and missiologists, 1 Corinthians 9 is referenced as a key text that addresses the degree to which missionaries or believers can embrace and accept various aspects of culture as they seek to make the gospel message known. Certain verses in this chapter are cited in connection with "contextualization." As I understand it, contextualization primarily addresses issues for outsiders to a given culture, especially how they do (or do not) adapt their life and communication to fit that culture. Sometimes these same verses are used in connection with what some would call "identification," which I am using in this article to refer to how "insiders" in a given culture might (or might not) retain various aspects of their birth culture as they live as disciples under the Lordship of Jesus and the authority of Scripture.⁹

As in the foregoing discussion about idolatry, so here Paul expresses both affirmations and limitations. An affirmation is his statement that he has become "all things to all people." A limitation is the statement that he lives "under the law of Christ."

Paul places a high value on what I am calling contextualization and identification,¹⁰ although naturally he does not use these terms. Regardless of the vocabulary we use, their importance is indeed central to his thinking. While he expresses a limitation on the degree to which he might seek to "be all things," it is still something he pursues and holds up as a model.

For some readers, the flow of Paul's thinking might seem difficult to follow. I myself used to read 1 Corinthians in such a way that chapter 9 seemed to be an odd insertion between chapters 8 and 10, especially because those two chapters seem to be very much on a common topic: food offered to idols/idolatry.

And then comes chapter 9 and suddenly Paul is discussing his rights, his way of earning a living, and his heart to be all things to all people so that, by all possible means, he might win some. Is chapter 9 an aside or the central point of Paul's argument?

At the beginning of this article, I discussed the place of these three chapters in the flow of the letter as a whole. Using Bailey's arguments about ring structures, I contended that chapters 8–10 form the focal point of the letter. Indeed, these chapters are at the heart of the other rings, and as such are the most important chapters. If Bailey is right about the importance of the ring structure, the real point Paul wants to make will be found here.

And right in the center of these three chapters (framed by another ring inside

the rings) is chapter 9. The whole book is a series of rings, and the two rings closest to chapter 9, on either side, are the discussions of idols and idolatry and food offered to idols found in chapters 8 and 10. But the ring inside those rings is the most crucial point Paul wants to make.

Conclusions Concerning "Identification" in Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians

Just as I summarized Paul's points regarding idolatry above, I will do so here regarding what I have called identification. Because Paul addresses this topic inside the rings dealing with idols and idolatry, I will summarize the points about identification with reference to idols and idolatry as well.

The Push Towards Identification

Charity drives Paul. Indeed, the concern for charity in chapters 8 and 10 sets the stage for Paul's principle (or core value) related to identification. Concerning food offered to idols, charity dictates that a believer set aside his freedom (to eat) in order to safeguard the conscience of a brother or sister. So also, in a parallel fashion, Paul gives up his freedom in chapter 9 by releasing his right (for support, for a wife to accompany him, etc.) in order to make the gospel freely accessible. He voluntarily sets aside his own birth-culture lifestyle—even his ingrained sense of what is clean and unclean—in order to make the gospel accessible to Gentiles. At the same time, he is willing to keep the commands of the Torah—commands he does not ask Gentiles to keep—in order to make the gospel accessible to Jews.

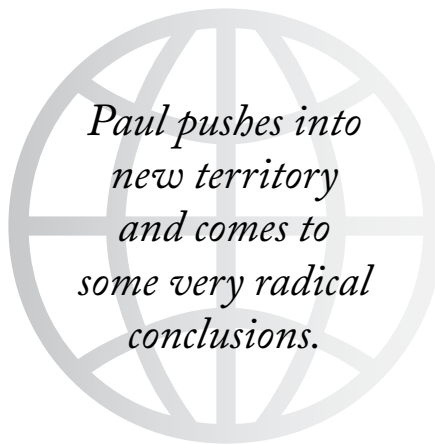
The Limits to Identification

Paul does not specifically address idolatry again in Chapter 9, but makes a very similar point when he refers to living under "the law of Christ." When we set that phrase "law of Christ" in the context of the whole letter to the Corinthians, we find a deeper understanding of what that means: the

voluntary giving up of our freedoms and rights because we're constrained by charity. We see this in chapters 1–4 (unity), chapters 5–7 (sexual purity) and chapters 8–10 (freedom from idols). And then we see it in an even more personal way in chapter 9 when Paul talks about giving up his rights to a wife, to a Jewish lifestyle, etc., in order to reach more people.

Implications for Movements to Jesus That Remain Within

This discussion of 1 Corinthians is not simply intended to be an academic exercise. I began this article by saying



that I want to suggest implications for real ministry. I will mention three implications, each having to do with the main headings of this paper: local theology, idolatry, and identification.

Implications: Local Theology

By comparing the concerns of 1 Corinthians to those addressed by the Acts 15 Council, I believe we can see examples of local theology in the Scriptures themselves. Acts 15 wrestled with issues of how to accept the new Gentile believers into what had been previously a church of Jewish believers (living a Jewish lifestyle) and whose main concern was the question of circumcision. These Jewish believers had to examine the Torah, in which circumcision is clearly required for any male wanting to become part of the people

of Israel. They had to compare that with the prophetic tradition. Note in this connection that James cites at least two prophets in his summary statements, from which he concludes that God had a plan for making a people for Himself *from among the Gentiles*; indeed, it is the prophetic tradition that leads the Council to conclude that Gentiles do not have to become part of the people of Israel, that they do not have to convert to Judaism.

Paul is a major proponent of the Council's decision, as we see in the later verses of Acts 15. However, when he begins to help the Corinthians to address their questions about food offered to idols, the Council's few words on the subject ("refrain from it") are clearly not sufficient to solve every question that might arise in different circumstances. Based on the principles of the gospel, Paul pushes into new territory and comes to some very radical conclusions: a believer can eat the meat bought in the market (or the meat set before him or her while at another person's home, or the meat offered to an idol while actually sitting in an idol's temple) so long as that believer guards his or her heart and also respects the (perhaps weaker) consciences of other brothers and sisters in Christ; all this to the end that none of them, the "stronger" believer included, fall back into idolatry.

This conclusion is quite different from what the Council had decided; it is a conclusion hammered out in a new setting, while based on the same principles.

Movements to Christ (especially those remaining within cultures very different from the settings that have led to time-honored and deeply cherished Christian traditions in other parts of the world) need space to work out new solutions when unforeseen questions arise. These solutions must be rooted in the same principles we see in both Acts 15 and 1 Corinthians, principles that involve both sifting and comparing Scripture, and applying the gospel.

Implications: Idolatry

One recurring point of contention in the debate about whether (or to what extent) a disciple can remain within his birth religion is the question of participation in religious ceremonies, rituals and worship.

My understanding of Paul's thinking in 1 Corinthians has led me to suggest that what Paul forbids is the intentional and active attempt to commune (or connect) with a spiritual being other than God. If this is correct, this analysis suggests a way to frame the question for contemporary settings.

Rather than simply asking whether certain actions or rituals or places are inherently idolatrous (e.g., "Can a believer regularly go to the mosque or a Hindu temple?"), it might be more important to ask what activities, rituals, ceremonies, or rites result in the believer, as a participant, actually seeking to commune with another spiritual being other than the One True God. If I am reading Paul correctly, the issue of idolatry needs to be framed in terms of the believer's intention in the matter.

I have argued that Paul's position on this sort of question would be more complex than a mere yes or no. For Paul, the answer will be different for different believers, depending upon the individual believer's conscience. What is the same for all believers, according to Paul, is their responsibility to respect the consciences of others, never pressuring fellow believers to act in ways contrary to their convictions.

Implications: Identification

What seems clear (to me, at least) is that Paul has placed at the very heart of his letter a powerful and passionate description of his own motivations in ministry. He desires to do everything he can to make the gospel accessible. He seeks to remove barriers in order to maximize the free flow of the gospel. Whether this involves letting go of his own rights, preferences, or (I can well imagine) his social and cultural com-

Rather than simply asking whether certain actions or rituals or places are inherently idolatrous, it might be more important to ask . . .

fort zone, Paul does all these things that the gospel might spread.

While limits to that freedom indeed exist, our discussion of 1 Corinthians suggests that such limits are surprisingly few. Further, we've seen how Paul applies the principles behind the few restrictions mentioned in Acts 15 (idolatry and sexual sin) to a new situation in Corinth. In my opinion, he modifies the restrictions related to meat sacrificed to idols by adding (or making explicit) a further limit to a believer's freedom: the impact of that freedom on the conscience of another. The issue of how to do local theology responsibly and well is an important one. The issue of idolatry and/or worship is also critical, and Paul has strong words to say about it.

But the ring structure of 1 Corinthians highlights that "the heart of the heart" of Paul's teaching in this letter is his passion to see the gospel spread and every possible barrier and unnecessary fetter removed. The fact that Paul requires such a small number of necessary things may be shocking to some of us who have been taught that the gospel we proclaim must be guarded by turning it into a gospel that says we are saved by Jesus *plus* [fill in the blank].

The gospel must indeed be guarded. But we guard it best when we add the least to it, thus allowing the gospel to be the gospel. **IJFM**

Endnotes

¹ I use the term "local theologizing" here for convenience. The process has been called "self-theologizing," "biblical theology in culture," etc. See discussions of the process of developing local theologies in Shaw and Van Engen (2003), Reed (Principle Papers, www.bild.org), Schrieter (1985), Cook, et. al. (2010).

² Bailey, Kenneth E., 2011, *Paul Through Mediterranean Eyes: Cultural Stud-*

ies in 1 Corinthians, Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press. Fee, Gordon, D., 1987. *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.

³ Bailey states that what he calls ring structure is another way of talking about "chiasm," a regularly discussed feature in biblical studies (2011: 528). He does not explain why he elects to coin a new term, though I would posit that readers unfamiliar with these matters might find Bailey's term the one easier to understand without a dictionary.

⁴ I have slightly modified the outline from Bailey's original vocabulary.

⁵ This is not only true in terms of the chapter numbers, which were of course not added by Paul himself and thus could mislead an interpreter. An analysis of the sentences and words in the letter, and a comparison of amounts of material prior to and following chapter 9 both lead to the same conclusion: that chapter 9 forms the center inside the center and as such is Paul's main thrust in the whole letter.

⁶ I am not using "local theology" in this article to refer to the related process by which communities of believers develop theological concepts and "frameworks" by applying scripture to the questions that arise in and from their culture (with appropriate input from the global and historical church and the local theologizing done by believers through the course of history and in other contemporary contexts as well). That is a valid process as well, and I believe scripture also provides examples of it, but it is not what I see happening in 1 Corinthians and so I do not take it up here.

⁷ Fee argues that Galatians follows both 1 and 2 Corinthians, though he does not address the relationship of either to the date of Acts 15 (1987: xi).

⁸ I would suggest that further discussion of my tentative definition should include descriptions of angelic encounters in the scriptures which involve conversation between a person of faith and a spiritual being other than God, something I think implies at some level the act of "communing." Missiologists from more catholic backgrounds (Roman, Orthodox, high church Anglican) may want to add reflections on how this discussion impacts or is impacted by their various conceptions of the communion of saints as well.

⁹ I use the term "insider" to refer simply to a person born in a culture. Unlike some in the "insider movement" debate, I am not using "insider" to refer to a witness for the gospel who comes from outside the culture.

¹⁰ I use both terms when referring to Paul. As a Jew called to the Gentiles he could be aptly described as an outsider, and thus he would be engaging in what some modern missiologists see as contextualization. And yet, as a Jew who also ministered to Jews he would be clearly an insider, and the term identification would be more applicable. In my mind this is further complicated by the fact that Paul is also very much a Hellenistic insider, at least to a certain degree (not in every aspect of the Hellenistic worldview certainly), and thus even in his communication with and life among the Gentiles, identification might be just as appropriate a term as contextualization. If nothing else, these considerations should cause us all to hold such categories very loosely.

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The Triune God and the Plethora of Religions: The Holy Spirit in Mission

by Scott W. Sunquist

Editor's note: The following is an excerpt from Scott W. Sunquist's 2013 book entitled, Understanding Christian Mission: Participation in Suffering and Glory, pp. 259–268. It is used by permission of Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group (<http://www.bakerpublishinggroup.com>). See ad p. 2.

At a Christian gathering in 1993 in the United States, the following prayer to the goddess Sophia was given: “We are women in your im-age. With the hot blood of our wombs we give form to new life.... With nectar between our thighs we invite a lover. We birth a child. With our warm body fluids we remind the world of its pleasures and sensations.”¹

After this prayer, women were invited to receive a red dot in the middle of their forehead, a sign of the sixth chakra, or seat of divine wisdom.² A middle-aged Indian woman, whose grandfather was a convert to Christianity from Hinduism, refused to have a dot placed on her forehead. She explained to the surprised Anglo-American Presbyterian,

When I was a young girl in Ludhianna, India, I came home from school one day with a red dot on my forehead and my mother sat me down and said, ‘Honey, why do you have that red dot on your forehead?’ I explained that some of my friends had them at school and they asked if I wanted one too. I thought it looked nice. My mother explained we should never have a red dot on our heads. Then she said, ‘We are Christians. When you were young, we brought you to church, baptized you, and the priest took holy oil and marked the sign of the cross on your forehead in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. You have been marked already by the cross of Jesus Christ.

In this Indian Christian’s mind, being marked by the Spirit of the living God meant something very deep and serious. She understood that one could be “marked” or set aside for other uses and for other service—but she was set aside to serve the Triune God alone. Each religion is its own “web of significance;”³ or, to put it as Paul Tillich does, “A mixture of religions destroys in each of them the concreteness which gives it its dynamic power.”⁴

There is no issue in today’s missiology that is more contested and at the same time more important than the nature of the multitude of religions and the Christian belief in one God as revealed in Jesus Christ. This would not be much of an issue if Jesus had been more understanding, more tolerant, of his own religious friends. However, Jesus was pretty strong on false belief and false (or hypocritical) action, and the Old Testament is even stronger. We

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should begin this section by noting that Jesus's harshest words were to those closest to his own beliefs—the Jews—and he seemed the most tolerant, or open, to those furthest (it is good to remember Luke 4:23–30 at this point). By analogy, it would be good for us to be strongest in our critique of the church and more gracious to those who seem furthest from Jesus (but who may be very close!).

I spent a year trying to decide where to put the discussion on religions in a missiology book that is focused on a trinitarian approach to mission. It was in a moment of sudden insight that I realized that our struggle with “religions” is that we usually start with Jesus (which is not a bad idea) rather than the Holy Spirit (which I think is a better idea). Simply put, I have come to believe that God's Spirit is at work in all peoples and his Spirit seeks to recover the image of God in each person and in every culture. The same Holy Spirit who applies redemption to us, and gives us spiritual gifts, is also working in the lives of people of other loyalties. Therefore, when we talk about other religions, we are talking about ultimate loyalties that reflect both truth and error. This has been recognized throughout the twentieth century, especially in earlier gatherings of the International Missionary Council. Thus, we can and should affirm that Christian witness to someone of another faith involves a spiritual awareness of God's presence in others, even while the Holy Spirit is calling others to the cross. For example, Cornelius was not a Christian (he was a seeker, a God-fearer), but God's Holy Spirit spoke to him and led him to the man who would deliver the message of Jesus Christ to him (Acts 10).

Another reason for placing the discussion of religions in this chapter on the Holy Spirit is it reflects that reality, and all theology, in the end, must connect with real people and real situations. I have interviewed many people from Africa and Asia who were raised in other religions

(mostly Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists), and all have had some definite experience of the Holy Spirit *before* they were Christian. Some had reoccurring dreams calling them to Jesus, some had a demon cast out, and one had a vision of heaven in which the angels were playing Sri Lankan instruments. If people of other faiths have experiences of the Holy Spirit, and if all people are made in the image of God, and if the Holy Spirit is the One who works to restore that image in redemption, then missiology should place the study of other faiths under the topic of the Holy Spirit.

Christian mission, as we have noted, is the mission of God bringing forth his glory for the nations of the world. It is a work of the Triune God, whereby



nations or cultures are honored and “lifted up.” Religions are part of every culture, and therefore Christian mission speaks to the religious dimension of each culture. We must avoid two temptations when it comes to Christian mission and religions. On the one hand, it is too easy in the globalized free market economy of religions to see religions as items on a shelf that can be taken or ignored. According to this mind-set, religions are neutral variables in any culture, and therefore we can ignore religious belief and then get on with the real mission of doing justice and loving mercy. But religions are never neutral, and if we treat religions as a commodity, we are misunderstanding both the role of religion and the religious person. Secular Western

governments have made this mistake in foreign policy decisions in Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. Christians should know better.

The second temptation is to make religion everything, and view the gospel as needing to attack each religion. Religions are not so easily reified (made into a thing) and are much more complex and relational than this view allows for. When we speak about religions, we need to speak about religious people: people who have particular faith commitments. Therefore, we do not want to pretend that religions are so small a thing (like the color of a shirt we might wear), nor so great a thing (like the only concern of Christian mission). Religious belief and practice is always expressed in languages and cultures; it can be all-consuming for a people or nation, or a nation can try to ignore it—but it is always present. Jesus Christ seeks to dwell in each culture, and therefore religious beliefs and practices will become important as the Holy Spirit works to bring forth faith and sanctification.

As we have seen in the above brief look at the Holy Spirit in the Bible, God's Spirit reaches out and calls people to himself. We have looked at the Spirit speaking through preachers, evangelists, prophets, and even to pagan kings (Pharaoh of Egypt and King Nebuchadnezzar) and religious non-Christians (Cornelius). In each of these cases, God's Spirit is drawing people closer to himself, to a greater understanding of who God is and what his will is for individuals. Revelation by the Holy Spirit is a call to repentance and obedience. As we now look at Christian mission and religions we reaffirm this theological truth: God is the One who, through his Holy Spirit, draws people to Jesus Christ. We are invited to participate in communicating his love and mercy for his greater glory.

Having said this, we remember that the gospel has often been carried to people of other faiths in both appropriate and inappropriate ways. Christian mission

has a checkered past. It is important to remember the violence and inappropriate work of the Spanish using the *Requirimento* in the Americas; mission was mixed with conquest and monks were caught in the cross fire. It is also important, however, to remember the careful study of religions that marked the work of the Jesuits in Japan, Vietnam, China, and India, as well as the work of people like Ziegenbalg and Plutschau in India, Hudson Taylor in China, and many others. Recognizing the work of the Holy Spirit requires us to do careful study of other religions and cultures, so as to be a servant of the other. Those whom we love, and those whom God loves, deserve to become known by us. Mission is about communication, and communication involves relationship. The more intimate a relationship, such as communicating the deep love of God, the more knowledge and empathy is required. Thus, we take time to point out major themes in studying other religions, so as to be faithful communicators of the gospel.⁵

Points of Religious Contact

Christian mission to people of other faiths involves much more than any single concern (such as salvation or peacemaking). I think it is helpful to think about relating to people of other faiths with several different points of contact: areas that we need to discuss with our neighbor of another faith. Each of these areas becomes an opportunity for better understanding and is an opportunity for the Holy Spirit to bring about conversion or (for the missionary) sanctification.⁶ Later we will talk at length about evangelism as part of Christian mission to people of other faiths, but here we look at the fundamental issue in a missional encounter: listening, understanding, and engaging.

Salvation/Salvations

First, although it is not the only issue, we do relate to our Buddhist or Muslim neighbor concerning salvation and

A *Theravada Buddhist does not believe in God, so there is no “one” to reveal further truths.*

the afterlife; but we have to be careful, because another religious person may have a very different view of salvation. Therefore, we need to ask what they seek to be saved from, how that might happen, and what an afterlife might look like. Most religions are based on the intuition that “the world is not right and I am not right.” The Bible calls this sin; the Buddha identified suffering (the first Noble Truth) as the main problem. The cause of this problem (suffering) for Buddhists is attachment, and so the call to salvation is a call to become completely unattached. Many people do not even understand what they are saved from, or what the goal of their religion is, so a dialogue may produce little light and more questions than answers. Seeking answers together, however, will open up the relationship to further understanding regarding salvation. How we view the afterlife will determine how we live in this life.⁷

Revelation

The second issue for dialogue is revelation. Some people of other faiths have no concept of the revelation of truth from God, or Allah, or Brahman—only a personal enlightenment. A Theravada Buddhist does not believe in God, so there is no “one” to reveal further truths. Others have even higher views of revelation in a sacred text than most Christians have (I am thinking of Islam here). Who reveals, and how truths are revealed, are both important questions to ask. To follow up, however, we would want to know if that revelation can be apprehended by all people or, like Gnosticism, is it a secret or private knowledge? What does the person say about, or know about, God? Is God even knowable or, like in many religions, is God known only as a distant creator who abandoned

creation and now can only be known indirectly through ancestors? Are there many names for God, no name, or a single name? What are the primary and secondary characteristics of God? Is God loving? Is God frightening?

Ethics and the Moral Life

Third, we must relate to people of other faiths as we live in community and as we make moral and ethical decisions in community. All Christians live in pluralistic contexts. If a single Christian family is living in Saudi Arabia or Algeria, they are living in a multireligious context, and they will need to negotiate public morals and ethics. We make decisions for the welfare of society, as well as for the peace and justice of the public realm, *with* people of other faiths. How do our neighbors think about abortion, about war, about technology, about justice? This is often the strongest area for interreligious relationship, because Muslim and Christian mothers both want their young children to avoid drugs, violence, and premarital sex. Buddhist and Christian men are concerned about job security and medical bills. As we discuss these moral and ethical issues, we get back to the cause of beliefs and values, and when this happens we are getting closer to the Kingdom of God. Where there will be tension is when we talk about the degree of tolerance and pluralism that we will support. Do we wish to build a pluralistic, just, and harmonious society together? What about the *dhimmi* (non-Muslim protected community) and the *ummah* (Muslim community)? How can Christians live peaceably and faithfully when restrictions are put on practices that flow out of beliefs? This is one of the major issues today for Christian mission in Islamic contexts: is it possible to build a just society

together? There have been historic instances where Christians have lived in more-just Islamic realms, and there have been times when Christians lived in Muslim realms that have been deathly oppressive.

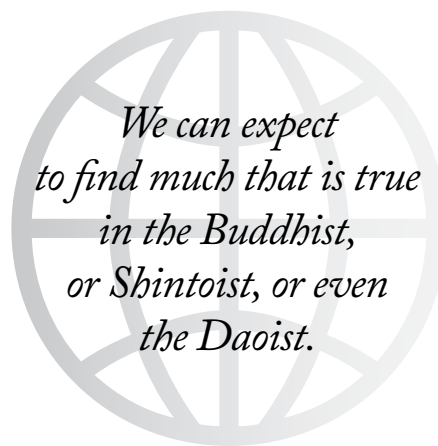
Evil

The topic of evil must come up at some point, and if it doesn't we need only read the front page of the morning paper. For some religious people, evil is not really so bad, it is simply not being quite good enough, sort of like not finishing your homework. For others, evil has personality and is constantly plotting to bring the downfall of people and nations. Along with this discussion will come the discussion of pain and suffering. Quite often interreligious discussions or relationships begin in pain: the death of a family member, a family tragedy, or a diagnosis of cancer. This is the time to listen carefully to how the person understands suffering, death, and the presence of evil. The first funeral I did was that of a young woman who committed suicide. She was the only Christian in a Buddhist family, and she killed herself over a broken heart. Not only was the family Buddhist, but they did not speak English, and I did not speak Mandarin. They had all types of questions—as did I. “Lord, why does my first funeral have to be a young woman, a suicide, and the only Christian in a Buddhist family?” Church members brought food to the family every night for two or three months. They stayed around the home, talking, praying, and listening. In the midst of all the discussions about evil and suffering, the family finally found comfort in Jesus Christ. The parents, siblings, and newborn nephew were all baptized the next year. This is not to say that all tragedies lead to God, but it does demonstrate that tragedies strip away our insulating comfort and expose us directly to the big problems in life. When this happens, people are often looking for a good shepherd.

Jesus

Jesus will eventually come up in a dialogue with people of other faiths. Most people are more interested in Jesus than they are in his followers, and that is a good thing. Christians who are struggling to be faithful to Jesus Christ will often do things that cause cognitive dissonance: “You took your vacation at a refugee camp in Iraq?” “You teach illegal immigrants to speak English every Friday night?” As a history professor in Shanghai, China, once said to his students, who were studying the history of missions in China,

If you want to understand why these Christian missionaries came all the way to China and worked so hard



to set up schools and hospitals, you have to study about Jesus. They are trying to follow Jesus.

So, when the time comes, it is important to be able to explain about Jesus—not as a doctrine, but as a person. “Read the Gospel of Mark, and tell me what you think.” Some religions have already pegged Jesus as a prophet (but the information about him in the Bible is not accurate), or as an avatar (a really good one, but one of many). They may disagree with your estimate of Jesus, but at some point in the dialogue you need to allow Jesus to speak.

Truth Claims

As a final issue, and as a type of catchall category, we relate to other religions on

the basis of their truth claims. Truth claims include what we say as well as how we judge truth from error. “Why do you say that?” will be asked time and again as we seek to understand truth claims from others. Some truth claims will never be harmonized; for example, either humans are creatures (created by God), or humans are part of God (Brahma). There is a world of difference between these two claims, and the closest we can get to harmonizing them is probably to talk about the *imago Dei* that is in each person. Other truth claims, once they are voiced, will draw us close together because all truth is God's truth. Thus we can expect to find much that is true in the Buddhist, or Shintoist, or even the Daoist. This is why we are discussing religions under the Holy Spirit. The same Spirit who placed the moral concern of honoring parents in the Confucianist's mind caused me to write the Ten Commandments on a piece of cardboard for my children many years ago. And so we read together: “Honor your father and your mother so that your days may be long . . .”

Theologies of Religion

This is not the place to review the theology of religions, but it is necessary to be able to think about religions theologically, and I still think the paradigm developed by David Bosch in the 1970s is the most helpful and one that best explains all the evidence.⁸ Before giving his Christian theology of religions, Bosch outlined the following earlier paradigms that have been present in the twentieth century:

1. Relativism: All religions are paths to the one truth. This is represented by Ernst Troeltsch, William Hocking, Paul Tillich, and William Cantwell Smith.
2. “Not to destroy but to fulfill”: This is represented by Georges Khodr, Kaj Baago, and J. N. Farquhar.
3. Revelation and religion in antithesis: This is represented by Karl Barth.

4. Abiding paradox: Christian faith and other religions. This is represented by Emil Brunner and Hendrik Kraemer.

Bosch then talks about the two lines of thought in the Bible that lead to opposite conclusions if they are not braided together. First is the universal line that points to God as Lord of all the nations and peoples. God's inclusion of other nations reveals his intent to include them in the future. The other line is exclusive, and this also is found throughout the Bible: "There is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). After discussing biblical passages related to the exclusive and inclusive view of people of other religions, Bosch gives his "Tripolar Christian Theology of Religions."

Most people doing theology of religions are working with two poles (good or evil; or religious consciousness of a person and a real revelation from God), or they are working with one pole ("religion emerges from within man himself"). Following Peter Beyerhaus, Bosch outlines the three poles involved in a Christian theology of religions in the following manner:

1. A person's *religious awareness* of, and concern for, God
2. God's involvement with humanity, through *revelation*
3. The sphere of *demonic* influence

A Christian theology of religion must take into account these three variables. Thus, we can understand any religion as these three working together in the mind of the individual and in the collective spirit of the culture or nation.

We can use this tripolar framework to understand Christianity as a religion. There are times that Christians are aware of God's revelation, and they receive it and follow it. At other times, they receive God's revelation, but they are also listening to the evil one, turning grace into law and freedom into servitude. Christians, under a demonic

Christians who do not have Christ are no different than the Hindu lying on a bed of nails to purify his thoughts and remove his sins.

influence, kill other Christians over the formulation of the Eucharist, and they have also tortured other Christians for false claims about being a witch. How do we make sense of the dark deeds that Christians have done without seeing something of the demonic at play? By the same token, we can make sense of other religions as also having an awareness of God's revelation, but as also listening at times to another voice that pulls them away from God. We have to be humble and cautious in thinking this way, for many people have caused great damage pointing the finger at a person or religion and calling it evil. That is not how this model is to be used. We use this model to make sense of the good that is in other religious people and the evil that we might find in the church, and vice versa. When Don Richardson discovered that the Dani of Papua had developed a central cultural value of treachery, he thought there was no way they could understand about Jesus: Judas was the real hero to the Dani. But, when he tried to end intertribal warfare, he learned about the culturally developed method of peace whereby the chief of one of the tribes gives his own child to the chief of the warring tribe. The child is raised, and lives his whole life, with the other tribe. As long as the child is alive, there is peace between the tribes. This "peace child" is just as important to the Dani as the value of treachery. In a sense, all religions have some treachery and some peace child. In interreligious dialogue, we hope to come to the point of being able to name the peace child—and then introduce him to the other.

The Holy Spirit and Religions: A Postscript

The great Indian evangelist and wandering monk Sadhu Sundar

Singh wrote a book with a memorable title: *With and Without Christ: Being Incidents Taken from the Lives of Christians and of Non-Christians which Illustrate the Difference in Lives Lived with Christ and Without Christ.*⁹ It is a fascinating little study on the difference Jesus makes in people's lives, whether they are called Christian or not. It is also interesting to find that those Christians who do not have Christ (we all have met them) are no different than the Hindu lying on a bed of nails to purify his thoughts and remove his sins. Following Jesus's lead, Sundar Singh explains that the poor and inadequate are more drawn to Jesus and follow Jesus more often than the rich and powerful.

As the magnet draws steel, not gold or silver, so the cross of Christ, draws sinners who truly repent and turn in their need to Him, but not those who trust in their own goodness and are satisfied to live without him.¹⁰

As early as the 1920s, Sundar Singh was aware of many Indians and Nepalese who were following Christ, but who were not identified as Christians. Today, we talk about unbaptized believers, secret believers, and even Muslim followers of Isa. Religious titles are less the issue than being marked with the cross (as our Indian woman was as a child). Those who have the Spirit, whose image of God is being refashioned or polished, will reflect Christ to others in all that they are. If they do not, if they resist that work of the Spirit, they are in fact "Christians without Christ." **IJFM**

Endnotes

¹ Stephen Goode, "Feminists' Crusade Sparks Holy War," BNet, CBS Interactive Business Network, accessed June 4, 2011, http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1571/is_n30_v10/ai_15640006/.

²Used mostly in Hinduism, the meaning of the red dot, or *bindi*, is varied, but in all cases it carries religious meaning related to meditation, wisdom, and centering oneself (often meditating on a god or goddess or on the merits of the Buddha).

³Clifford Geertz (referring to Max Weber) writes of cultures as being webs of significance that we spin ourselves. I am applying the same concept to religion, because religion is at the core of cultural meaning. Geertz expressed it this way: “Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretative one in search of meaning. It is explication I am after, construing social expression on their surface enigmatical.” From Geertz, “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture,” in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 5.

⁴From his last of his four Bampton Lectures (delivered in the fall of 1961), titled, “Christianity Judging Itself in the Light of Its Encounter with the World Religions,” published in *Christianity and the*

Encounter of World Religions (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 61.

⁵This is not a book primarily on religions, on the history of religions, or on witnessing to people of other faiths. There is a huge and, like the universe itself, constantly expanding corpus of material on these topics. I mention a few here by way of introduction. The best new Roman Catholic approach to religions is the *Catholic Engagement with World Religions: A Comprehensive Study*, ed. Karl J. Becker and Ilaria Morali (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010). An excellent volume that includes a survey of major scholars from an evangelical perspective is that of Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *An Introduction to the Theology of Religions: Biblical, Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003). A creative and fair approach to religions for Christian mission is done by Terry Muck and Frances S. Adeney, *Christianity Encountering World Religions: The Practice of Mission in the Twenty-first Century* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009). Paul Knitter’s *No Other Name: A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes Toward the World Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985) is one of the most well-reasoned from a progressive perspective.

⁶We can actually say that dialogue with the other will bring about conversion, if we are listening carefully—if we mean by this conversion to a deeper understanding of God. This is what I mean by sanctification.

⁷Contra John Hick, who, speaking about the afterlife, said: “Whether it involves continued separate individuality we do not know and we ought not to care. Sufficient that, whatever its nature, our destiny will be determined by the goodness of God.” He then quotes from John Robinson’s book *But That I Can’t Believe!*: “Death may be the end. So what? . . . Nothing turns on what happens after death.” From John Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths* (Oxford: One World Publications, 1993), 186. See chap. 10 for a larger discussion of salvation and religious pluralism.

⁸*Theology of Religions* (Pretoria: University of South Africa, 1977). This volume was designed as a study guide for the Department of Missiology and Science of Religion at the University of South Africa.

⁹Sadhu Sundar Singh, *With and Without Christ* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1929).

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 75.

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Editorial Reflections

Culture as a Moral Order: Recovering Missionary Elenctics From the Anthropology of Robert Priest

The exemplary field work of one mission anthropologist, Robert Priest, has become somewhat of a plumb line for the subject of “culture and conscience.” Twenty years ago his article “Missionary Elenctics: Conscience and Culture” appeared in the pages of *Missiology* (Vol. II, No. 3, July 1994) as a contribution to the developing field of “elenctics” (i.e., what J. H. Bavinck introduced as a missiology concerned with the conviction of sin).¹ Raised in a SIL household in Bolivia, Priest apparently responded to the call of SIL linguist Kenneth Pike, who had “a dream, a wish, a hope—that some scholars will help us to understand conscience better by careful, documented, cross-cultural research.”² Wayne Dye’s 1976 study “Towards a Cross-Cultural Definition of Sin”³ also helped focus Priest’s field work among the Aguaruna Indians of Peru:

I focused on culture as a moral order, collected and analyzed moral discourses and moral vocabulary, examined shame and guilt, analyzed moral symbolism in myth and ritual, and studied native sermons and conversion narratives.⁴

It’s been two decades since Priest published some of his conclusions from that field work. His original article (online at <http://mis.sagepub.com/content/22/3/291.full.pdf>) offered a series of twenty-five propositions on the nature of conscience and cultural variation. His intention was to engage the mission enterprise and hopefully encourage further missiological research on the subject (he now oversees PhD research at Trinity International University in Deerfield, IL). We wish to highlight his conclusions from 1994 as a simple list without the lengthy but brilliant annotations he provides in his article. The hope is that this outline of his outstanding contribution to elenctics might catalyze discussion and application by a new generation engaged in ministry. His remarkable formal propositions about conscience, culture, and missionary elenctics now follow:

1. The faculty of conscience is culturally universal (Romans 2:1-15; 2 Corinthians 4:2; 1 Corinthians 10:25, 27).
2. The faculty of conscience is a natural faculty and is thus capable of being studied, analyzed, and understood through empirical methods.
3. The content of conscience is fallible and variable.
4. The content of conscience is directly dependent on learned cultural meanings, norms, ideals, and values.
5. The content of conscience is likely to be shared by members of a given cultural group.
6. In an intercultural situation there will be both significant overlap and marked discontinuity between the consciences of interactants. But it is not the overlap which interactants will tend to notice. Rather it is in the area of discontinuity—specifically where one’s own conscience speaks and the other’s does not.
7. In an intercultural situation each interactant will thus tend to condemn the other morally for behavior about which the other has no conscience.
8. 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.
9. While human consciences do extensively agree with and overlap with morality as revealed in Scripture, there are also significant areas of discontinuity between consciences as shaped by culture and what is revealed in Scripture. Conscience on its own is not sufficient to unerringly guide us into sanctified moral understandings.
10. The missionary’s conscience has been shaped by his or her culture as well as by Scripture, and his or her conscience seldom clearly distinguishes the two.
11. 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.
12. Missionaries, whose message entails ideas of sin and judgment, will naturally tend—as already noted—to speak of sin with reference to matters about which their conscience speaks and native conscience is silent, with the result that native conscience does not work to support the message.
13. Missionary proclamation which stresses sin with reference to that which the missionary’s conscience deems sinful, and native conscience does not, has the effect of calling the listeners’ attention to cultural discontinuity, implying that the call to conversion is a call to abandon one’s own culture for that of the missionary. This confusion of gospel and culture has two possible results:
 - a. People refuse to convert because of the implication that conversion is a conversion from one culture—

DISCIPLESHIP METHODS MUST BE GROUNDED in a deep humility that recognizes that, as a cultural expatriate, one is not in a good position to authoritatively and unilaterally declare how biblical principles should be applied to cultural particulars.

their own, which they are familiar with, successful in terms of, and believe is good—to the missionary's national culture, which is alien and may even seem immoral.

- b. Or people may choose to convert precisely because of the implication that conversion is a conversion from their own culture to that of the missionary, such conversion being a cultural conversion rather than genuine conversion to God in Christ.
14. Preaching about good and evil in terms of missionary conscience rather than native conscience results in conversion and discipleship which bypasses native conscience and leads to converts accepting, relating to, and experiencing a new set of rules and norms, not through deep personal moral conviction, but as a new system of taboos.
15. Conversion and discipleship which bypass native conscience may lead to superficial conformity or to a compartmentalized conformity.
16. Conversion and discipleship which bypass native conscience may well create a situation where the missionary feels the need to take the role of policeman.
17. Conversion and discipleship which bypass native conscience often create a structure of dependency and paternalism.
18. Conversion and discipleship which bypass native conscience may well lay the groundwork for a breakaway, independent church.
19. Missionaries need to understand the role that culture has played in the formation of their own conscience, and need help in distinguishing scruples grounded in transcendent biblical moral truth from scruples shaped, at least in part, by conventional cultural meanings.
20. The missionary must seek to understand native conscience.
21. The missionary must seek to live an exemplary life in terms of the virtues and norms stressed by the people he or she is attempting to reach.
22. In initial evangelism the missionary should stress sin, guilt, and repentance principally with reference to native conscience, particularly that aspect of their conscience which is in agreement with Scripture.
23. With conversion, the content of conscience is not instantly changed. But under the tutelage of a new authority—the Word of God—the conscience of the believer who is growing in sanctification will be gradually changed in certain needed areas toward greater conformity with the written Word.
24. After conversion the believers' relation to their own conscience (which still differs from that of the missionary) remains central to their own spiritual well-being.
25. The methods used by missionaries to disciple native converts must be grounded in:
 - a. a radical eschewing of any authority but that of Scripture.
 - b. a deep humility which recognizes that, as a cultural expatriate, one is not in a good position to authoritatively and unilaterally declare how biblical principles should be applied to cultural particulars. **IJFM**

Endnotes

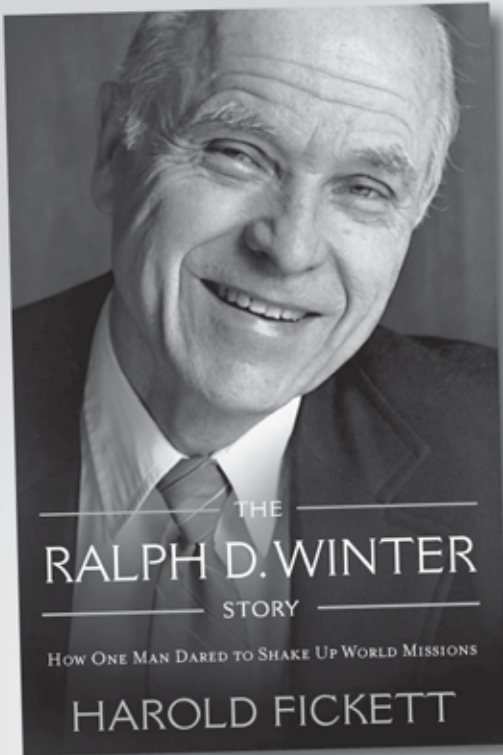
¹ Priest, p. 293. For Robert Priest's full online text of "Conscience and Culture": <http://mis.sagepub.com/content/22/3/291.full.pdf>

² Priest, p. 293.

³ For the full text of "Towards a Cross-Cultural Definition of Sin": <http://mis.sagepub.com/content/4/1/27.full.pdf+html>. See Priest, p. 293.

⁴ Priest, p. 293.

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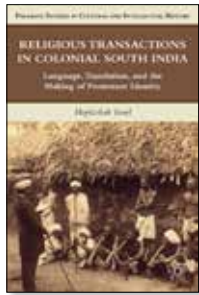
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Book Reviews

Religious Transactions in Colonial South India: Language, Translation and the Making of Protestant Identity, by Hephzibah Israel (Palgrave Studies in Cultural and Intellectual History, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, pp. 269 + xvi)

—Reviewed by H. L. Richard



This remarkable study of Bible translation into the south Indian Tamil language has many complex implications for missiology. It is a book that needs to be read and digested, and has relevance far beyond India. Even a review as extensive as this one can only begin to outline the issues discussed.

Hephzibah Israel repeatedly documents the complex tensions and options and irresolvable problems that arose in translating the Bible into Tamil.

In her Introduction, Israel shows three different broad entities with interest in Tamil translation: missionaries, colonial government, and Orientalist scholars. There was often agreement among the three, but also often significant variance (9). Israel had to engage discussions of how far Bible translation was liberative versus the supposed cultural destruction of missionary agendas.

I do not subscribe to the notion that all aspects of Christian mission were always “destructive of indigenous cultures” but neither do I agree with the celebratory conclusion that the mission of translation was entirely positive and advantageous to target cultures or that the missionary enterprise can be entirely disassociated from the history of colonialism. (11)

One of the broad themes of the book, also noted in the introduction, is how translation was used for sectarian purposes. But the general missionary outlook did not even recognize sectarian realities among Hindus.

My analysis of the missionary discourse on Bible translation confirms [G.A.] Oddie’s estimation that despite being aware of specific differences between Brahmanical and non-Brahmanical traditions in South India, and between Tamil Saivism and Vaishnavism, missionaries posited a unified category of “Hindu” against that of “Christian” or “Protestant” for translational purposes. (15)

Another broad theme of the book is the different paradigm for translation that was brought from the West, and particularly by missionaries.

Missionary translations, which were word for word renderings in Tamil from other language texts, differed significantly from the long history of “translations,” that is, rewritings in Tamil from other Indian languages. (21)

The introduction also gives a brief overview of the history of Bible translation into Tamil. Although the first Roman Catholic Tamil Bible was considerably later (NT 1857, OT 1904) than the Protestant (NT 1714, OT 1727), there were Tamil Roman Catholic writings well before the arrival of Protestants. One of the Protestant translation strategies was to be different from the Roman Catholics (27). The focus of the book, as the subtitle indicates, is on this Tamil Protestant identity and how translation issues contributed to that distinct identity.

The book thus does not focus on the history of Bible translation, but rather picks up three central issues that arise all through the history. The first issue is language, notably “disputes over the appropriateness of key religious terms” (33). The second is disputes over the various versions, particularly looking at “where certain versions were assigned authority and symbolic value above others by the community” (33). The third is genre, particularly the place of poetry.

The three chapters that focused on those issues are preceded by a chapter on translation in a broader perspective. It is fascinating to note that there is no term for “translation” in Sanskrit, and no discussion of the concept. Prior to Christian translations into Tamil there had been Buddhist works rendered into Tamil, but with a significantly different approach.

The most significant aspect of this [Buddhist translation] process was that translated texts were not always presented hierarchically lower as “copies” of “original” texts, but as independent creative works of equal merit. There was a flexibility in the translation process that allowed a freer relationship between an “original” and its translation. This fluid relationship between source text and target texts was mostly unacceptable to Western translators who sought to control and structure relations between the original text, the translator, and the translated text, distinguishing in fundamentally new ways the translator from the author and the translation from the original. In doing so, they also took upon themselves the task of shaping and regulating the development of modern Indian languages and reading practices, and thereby, the linguistic identities of those who spoke them. (52–53)

Israel sees three goals in the Protestant Bible translation project, and the three do not fit together very well:

One, culturally make familiar or “domesticate” the translated Bible for its Indian audiences; two, simultaneously offer the Bible as unique to Indian religious cultures, infallible in its teachings and ultimately unrecognizable or “foreignized” from all existing scriptures; and three, effect an appropriate “Protestant” identity for those who would convert. (53)

The ensuing discussion picks up five points where there was debate and discussion on translation, and the reality of

I do not subscribe to the notion that all aspects of Christian mission were always “destructive of indigenous cultures” but neither do I agree with the celebratory conclusion that the mission of translation was entirely positive . . . (Israel)

these three goals is documented in these debates. Whether to use existing terms employed by various Hindu sects or to create new terminology, “one of the most contentious debates” (53), is the first topic. Those who wanted the Bible to be understood argued in support of the use of existing religious terms, while others in the name of faithfulness to the original suggested that source language terms were a viable option (54). Israel suggests that even where there was support for genuine translation (the latter option of source language terms is a denial of translatability) people tended to “argue for somewhat simplistic solutions” (54).

One partial solution to the problem of using tainted Hindu terminology was discovered.

This problem was circumvented to an extent by the kind of words that were chosen from the existing vocabulary: the translators took care to pick either those that did not refer directly to Hindu ritual practices or those that were not widely used. In most cases, they presumed that the higher “truth” of Protestant semantics would shape the word to Protestant advantage. Over a period of time, Protestant meanings did accrue to some terms and came to be regarded as exclusively “Protestant terms” within the Protestant community. (56)

These choices fed subsequent controversies, as later revisions saw continued debate and often changes in terminology. But there was a reluctance to change what had become acceptable to the Christian community, particularly words that had developed a “Protestant meaning.” Israel points out that Indian languages have all been in transition, yet modernized language has mostly not been acceptable to Indian Protestants.

A second topic of debate was about literal or idiomatic translation. Israel does not go into great depth here, but does indicate that the debate is artificial. Particularly when “faithful” and “idiomatic” are set up as opposites, the terms of the discussion are too simplistic (59).

The third point is the question of using literary language or common language in Bible translations. Nothing like a solution was ever found, as the “proper” literary language was not intelligible to the masses, but the language of the masses was not “dignified” and so unworthy of sacred scripture. Middle ground was sought but really did not exist.

A fourth area of struggle related to translating from the original Hebrew and Greek texts. There was debate regarding the Greek manuscripts, but more so the issue was the place of the English King James Version. “By mid-[nineteenth] century, using the KJV of the English Bible as the primary standard of reference in most other Indian translation projects

became standard practice among Protestant translators” (63). This is illustrated from a striking statement in an 1869 report on a revision of the Tamil Bible which acknowledged that Fabricius’ famous version (beloved particularly among Lutherans) was a direct translation not indebted to either German or English versions and often more true to the original, and yet “it does not appear to us to be right to accept any variation from the English without examination” (63).

This attitude towards the King James Version is problematic on its own, but the same reverence for this “authorized version” was then passed on to the vernacular translations, quite literally a new canonization of a translated text.

The processes of canonization are so strong that in some instances, as in the case of the Tamil Bible, the perceived symbolic power of the authoritative Union Version effectively prevents acceptance of subsequent revisions or new translations by the Protestant community. (64)

Finally for this section, the fifth issue of debate was on the involvement of foreign and national translators. There was great fear that unspiritual consultants would corrupt translations, so many assurances were provided of missionary control. But missionaries could not do the work without massive assistance, and as time went on this was more widely recognized and accepted.

Missionary control of the translation process centered in the British and Foreign Bible Society, which is discussed at length at the close of this first chapter. It was thought that standard versions with uniform terms would produce genuinely Protestant converts.

“Uniformity” and “standardization” were two principle catchphrases that underpinned the translation debates we have discussed so far and thereby defined the Protestant translation project in nineteenth century India. Uniformity of two kinds was imagined, of vocabulary and style within a single language establishing one translation as a “standard” version and of key Protestant terminology across several or all language groups in India. The result hoped for was the creation of a shared vocabulary for a Protestant readership with which to articulate a standard and collective Protestant identity. (67)

Some of the aims of Bible translators, such as for standard versions and standard terminologies across the many vernaculars, are clearly related to cultural perspectives related to the Christian colonizing government. But this was an empty and unrealizable dream.¹

Even as they claimed that the Bible could be revealed in any language, the translators were unable to gain complete

But Israel shows a problem here; every Hindu will understand the meaning of the words, but they will not understand without further explanation just exactly what the phrase is referring to in Protestant contexts.

control over language and the Protestant belief in the cultural transparency of the Bible remained at odds with their translation experience. (79)

The goal of uniform terminology across India meant a bias for Sanskrit-based terms in the Tamil translations. This contributed to linguistic isolation of Tamil Christians when Tamil nationalists in the twentieth century sought to remove all Sanskritic terms from their language and use only “pure Tamil.”

Chapter two picks up the first of the three focal points of Israel’s study, the use of sacred terminology. The opening statement of the chapter is perhaps simplistic and axiomatic, yet it presents a perspective that at least in the realm of Bible translation remains alien to most people.

The construction of a “sacred” Tamil for Protestant use has not been the result of stable, reliable processes progressing in a linear fashion toward establishing a fixed set of terms as “Protestant.” As I demonstrate in this chapter, there are two reasons for this. First, the dichotomy between the desire to fix a set of terms as sacred and the fluidity of language use in social practice has disrupted the construction of a permanent Protestant sacred in Tamil. Second, and more importantly, existing “sacred” terms from the Tamil religious domain, when co-opted into the Protestant context, have circulated in parallel Protestant and non-Protestant domains and thus have been called upon to denote different meanings in each. (81)

The problem of having a distinctive message that was still clearly understood was simply a conundrum.

How was Protestant Christianity to communicate *difference* while using the same language? That is, the question was if Protestant translators in South India were to accept the proposition that it was entirely possible to locate linguistic equivalence, did *linguistic* equivalence between different languages also indicate *conceptual* equivalence between religions? Conversely, is it possible to utilize *linguistic* equivalents between languages inhabiting two different religious cultures without also pointing to *conceptual* equivalence between those religions? (84, italics original)

Four types of Tamil terms (or Sanskrit-terms adapted into Tamil) came into use in Bibles. Simple transliteration was often used, especially for names but also for cross (*kurucu* from Portuguese *cruz*) and other terms. A second type was Sanskrit terms that had Tamilized forms which were slightly altered to become specifically Protestant. Israel outlines the use of two such neologisms for “God” in eighteenth century translations, a fascinating discussion which I skip over with reluctance here, to focus on a later discussion about “God” in Tamil.

The third type is new compounds where both parts of the term are clearly understood; gospel as “good news” and “son of God” are among the examples given. But Israel shows a problem here; every Hindu will understand the meaning of the words, but they will not understand without further explanation just exactly what the phrase is referring to in Protestant contexts. There is considerable discussion of “baptism” at this point, with helpful exposition of the use of a Tamil compound (“bath of wisdom”) which became a distinctly Protestant term.

Finally, there are words used with no lexical change at all. Here the first discussion is of sacrifice as *pali*, which many objected to since the Vedic term *yajna* seems much more suitable and *pali* was widely used of crude animal sacrifices performed by many Hindus. Israel suggests that at this point *yajna* was rejected *because* it was the better translation; the problem was “*yajna*’s perceived conceptual similarity with the Protestant idea of sacrifice and hence its potential to render the boundaries between the two religions indistinct” (103). This type of reasoning is even more apparent in the next example, which is “God.”

Bible translation controversies in Tamil Nadu center on the right term for God, with the main options being *deva* and *kadavul* (I opt for popular transliteration rather than Israel’s technical use of *tēvan* and *kaṭavul*).² Israel discusses this in 18 pages which need to be studied alongside this quick summary of highlights.

The reading practices of Protestant Tamils indicate that support for or opposition to either term follows a certain pattern. The first step involves the construction of an etymological profile for each term as a basis from which to argue in its favor. Building on this constructed history of the linguistic makeup of the preferred term, the argument then turns to usage, focusing primarily on how familiar the term is either among Tamils across the religious and caste spectrum or within the Protestant Tamil community. The final argument is determined by the extent to which individuals (translators or readers) favor universal familiarity over exclusivity. (105)

Israel clearly documents from key players in the practice of translation that *deva* was adopted as the best term “more by the desire for uniformity across all Indian languages and a perceived connection with European languages rather than etymological considerations *within* specific individual languages” (109, italics original). What this means is that a poor word for “God” (*deva*) was chosen for bad reasons.³ Israel sees this fitting a pattern.

I suggest instead that *tēvan* [*deva*] was co-opted into the Tamil Bible precisely because it was *not* widely used in existing

There remains significant opposition to “*deva*” as the best term for God, some of the opposition based on a story that this term was introduced into the Bible as a deceptive ploy by the great reformer of Saivism, Arumuga Navalar.

Tamil scriptures to denote a Supreme Being or deity.⁴ (109; italics original)

The counter-intuitive nature of this decision is central to Israel’s thesis.

In a remarkable turn of events, however, *tēvaṅ* [*deva*] has become the most widely accepted term among twentieth-century Protestant Tamils....An explanation for such a contradiction, where a term is acknowledged as least appropriate but is embraced as the best term to represent the particularity or even peculiarity of the Protestant conception of God, must be sought in the various overlapping social and cultural realities within which the term has circulated in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. (110)

There remains significant opposition to *deva* as the best term for God, some of the opposition based on a story that this term was introduced into the Bible as a deceptive ploy by the great reformer of Saivism, Arumuga Navalar, who was a consultant for Bible translation (112-113). A more viable reason for opposition is based on the fact that *deva* “is unfamiliar to Tamil Hindus who continue to use it in its plural sense; there is no widespread awareness among them that it is a Protestant Tamil term to refer to the Protestant God” (113).

But this translation and terminology issue is now about community distinctiveness.

Almost all lay Protestants I interviewed were in favor of *tēvaṅ* [*deva*] as the standard term that specifically denoted the Protestant deity. This was often expressed as “it is a term for our God,” demonstrating strong group identification with the term. Even those who were aware of the negative etymological connotations of the term continued to insist that only this term served to mark Protestant identity as distinct. The combination of factors, which have enabled *tēvaṅ* [*deva*] to be established as the Tamil equivalent for the supreme Protestant God, have equally contributed to the opposition to the use of the term *kaṭavuḷ* [*kadavuḷ*]. Such wide-scale support for using the term *tēvaṅ* [*deva*] is an excellent example of a case where the etymological considerations of a term become irrelevant. (114, italics original)

The 1956 Revised Version and the 1995 Common Language Version both used *kadavuḷ* instead of *deva*.⁵ Israel says that

for the first time stated discursive strategies of the translators focused not on locating the explicitly conceptual *differences* but on identifying a linguistic term that might function as a *conceptual equivalent* of the Protestant notion of God....it is this decision that has given rise to the longest controversy in the history of the Bible in Tamil translation. (115, italics original)

The Revised Version of 1956 is no longer published; “church leaders and ‘pastors’ of Pentecostal and Evangelical

churches strongly condemn the use of *kaṭavuḷ* [*kadavuḷ*] as ‘ungodly’” (119-120). Thus also the common language version languishes. Israel gives a good summary.

kaṭavuḷ [*kadavuḷ*] has been least successful because by referring to a concept of God identical to Protestant notions outside Protestant territory, not only does it preclude the necessity of lexical modifications to “make” it more Protestant but it also challenges the dominant Protestant narrative that claims a unique space for itself in a multifaith context. (121)

In the jargon of missiological discussions of contextualization, the terminology of the Tamil Bible is accepted by the church precisely because it is *not* contextual; in fact it cannot be understood in general society. “Contextual” terms, which here means terms that people would normally use, are rejected because they are indeed normal and do not set apart the Christian as different. What does it mean for “the mission of the church” when this kind of isolationist distinctiveness is considered healthy?

The third chapter picks up Israel’s second main point, how different segments of the Tamil Protestant community reacted to the various language registers which appeared in the different Bible translations. Two case studies are presented, the first from the early 18th century focused on the great poet Vedanayaka Sastri and the second focused on the common language pure Tamil Bible translation of 1995. The fundamental point is that

conflicting notions of which Tamil translation is the more sacred version calls attention to the social histories of speaker groups within the community and related differences in language practices in colonial South India over and above disputes over doctrinal disagreements. (126)

Vedanayaka Sastri opposed the revision (associated with Charles Rhenius, NT 1833, OT 1840) of the translation done by Johann Philip Fabricius (NT 1772, OT 1798). Sastri opposed variations from traditional Tamil grammar, supporting a rather elitist approach to classical literature against a popularized attempt to use the common speech of people. This was all inter-related with the caste conflict that arose in the Tamil region, as Sastri’s Lutherans saw caste as mainly social but the Anglicans (who took over leadership in South Indian missions) opposed caste as a religious institution.

Related to this discussion is the development of a distinct Tamil Christian dialect, missionary Tamil.

Tamil’s strict diglossia, with two distinct registers—the spoken (kotcai Tamil) and the more formal written style governed by rigorous grammatical rules—has meant that any mingling of the

The twentieth-century Tamil Bibles that sought to bring the Bible into alignment with current Tamil usage failed miserably. Tamil Christians did not want to contextualize but to be a markedly different religious community.

two is either frowned upon or ridiculed. "Missionary Tamil" can be defined broadly as a combination of these two registers, with spoken registers entering the written form and the written not following grammatical strictures at all times (e.g., Tamil sentences spoken or written in Western syntax). (127–128)

The arrogance of the colonial missionary movement contributed to the massive communication failure that marks Christianity in South Asia.

Protestant missionaries of the nineteenth century who were either translators of the Bible or Tamil scholars had assumed that the special Protestant vocabulary and style of Christian Tamil that had developed in the context of Bible translation would become central to Tamil literary expression in the following years just as the English of the KJV had gained status as a literary register of English in subsequent centuries. (147)

But this did not happen. Few Christian writings are acclaimed as Tamil literature, and those that are have been written in the style of their time, not in "Christian Tamil" (148). The obvious linguistic isolation of Tamil Christians was a major factor behind the new translations of the twentieth century. L. P. Larsen of the revision committee for the Union Version commented in 1923 that

the fact that the language spoken by Christians was largely influenced by the reading of a Bible, the style of which did not satisfy the standards of Tamil literature, was one of the causes which tended to isolate the Christian community. (149, from British and Foreign Bible Society archives)

But the twentieth-century Tamil Bibles that sought to bring the Bible into alignment with current Tamil usage failed miserably. It has already been noted above that Tamil Christians did not want to contextualize, they want to be a markedly different religious community.

Significantly, the language register of the Union Version has survived mainly in the churches and private devotional domains of the Protestant Tamil community. Both they themselves and non-Protestant communities in Tamilnad identify its language as "Christian Tamil." Indeed, most Protestant Tamils lead a double life in terms of language use: although accepting the politically correct "pure" Tamil in the public domain, they slip into "Christian Tamil" with ease in the private spheres of the family and worship. (153)

Israel has her own complaints about the 1995 Common Language Version as too ideologically driven and thus at places artificial, so her work is not a campaign for a particular alternate translation. Again related to this twentieth century controversy, she shows how intimately it is related to social and political issues.

I have made a distinction between the socially and economically dominant Nadar castes among Protestant Tamils who have identified overtly with the language of the Union Version as *kalaimoḷi* ["branch language"] and nonelite Protestant Dalit intellectuals who have not. That is, sharing in the political ideology of the Dravidian Movement that was bringing about a revival of "pure" Tamil and supposedly a more equal society, Protestant (and Catholic) Dalit intellectuals saw the political strategy of Tamil purism as a means for social mobility under a new political dispensation; but such moves were perceived as a threat by the socially and economically dominant Protestant Nadars, expressed as concerns regarding the breaking the "unity" of the community. (163)

The final chapter on genre is entitled "Prose Truth Versus Poetic Fiction" due to Protestant missionary bias against poetry. In Tamil Bibles, "even the obviously poetical books such as the Psalms and Song of Solomon were not translated into Tamil verse until the mid-twentieth century" (181). Israel suggests that "in the process of translation, a source-language sacred text may become a target language non-sacred text, not because of the change in language or content but because of a change in genre" (171). Generally speaking, "Catholic missionary 'translations' of Scripture favored existing Tamil poetic genres while Protestant missionary translations patronized the newly developing discursive prose genres in Tamil" (170).

The Italian Jesuit Constanzo Beschi comes in for consideration as he proposed that poetic works must be central to evangelizing Tamils.

Despite Beschi's use of discursive prose, it is for [his] endorsement of Tamil poetry and for his own poetic compositions that he is best known among Tamils; in sharp contrast, while the Lutherans borrowed his prose style, they were dismissive of his poetry. It is not so much that his Protestant contemporaries disagreed with his assessment of Tamil poetry or high language registers, as we will see, but it is precisely the cultural power of such poetry, with its deep roots in rival religious faiths, that they mistrusted. (175)

Numerous Protestants and Protestant missionaries saw the importance of the poetic genre, not least Vedanayaka Sastri mentioned earlier. This tended to be extra-biblical literature, but biblical texts were also included at times. At this point Israel steps aside from her scholarly objectivity and does have a recommendation.

...investigating all translations of the Tamil Bible in print reveals that apart from listening to, catechizing, and reading the Tamil Bible, Protestant Tamil engagement extended to retranslating the Bible into culturally familiar verse genres. These traces of numerous verse translations by nineteenth-century Protestants point to underlying cultural factors that are often ignored in the grand

Nothing is more fundamental than the fact that the Bible is a message from God, so if a culture has a particular concept of the genre of a communication from God, that genre needs to be employed in the Bible.

narrative on Bible translation in the nineteenth-century South Indian context. My argument is that although these may not have been “equivalent” verse translations by nineteenth-century missionary standards of the Tamil prose Bible, such efforts reveal a popular interest in attempting to convert biblical passages already available in Tamil into Tamil verse. Though these were allowed to fade into obscurity with little encouragement from editors or missionary printing presses, it is worthwhile to retrieve them from the margins of the official project of translating the Bible in South India. (182)

Traditional Protestants (not only Tamil Protestants!) find this challenging, due to an assumption that conveying the meaning of the original words is the only thing that really matters. One response to this is to suggest that nothing is more fundamental than the fact that the Bible is a message from God, so if a culture has a particular concept of the genre of a communication from God, that genre needs to be employed in the Bible. A second comment is that the Bible itself uses different types of literature to communicate holistically, not just present “facts.” Finally, on the surface the request to just convey the original meaning of each word is impossible because Tamil words have different meanings from Greek words, and this is the case between any two languages; in Israel’s words, “translated texts generate new meanings in target cultures” (169). This is not a threat to the Bible, which itself, in various ways, recognizes and illustrates the dynamic involved in translation, primarily in the shift from Hebrew Old Testament to Greek New Testament. Still today the richness of the gospel continues to be manifest in new ways in new cultures all across the world.

This chapter also contains a long discussion of Tamil hymns and lyrics, with Vedanayaka Sastri again in a central role. This is invaluable material that needs careful study and analysis. By the mid-nineteenth century, “whether Protestant ‘natives’ should be allowed to compose and sing their own Tamil hymns was increasingly becoming the subject of wide debate” (195). It was never resolved as decisively as it needed to be in favor of the indigenous poet, and a bias against the poetic genre underlies the perceived problem.

In her brief conclusion Israel summarizes and critiques the current Tamil Protestant identity.

Protestant Tamil self-perceptions at the cusp of the twenty-first century have largely centered on collectively owning the one translation and using one term for God. Conversely, the repeated failure in achieving this has continuously been represented as a disturbing sign of division and, worse still, as an embarrassment to their religious faith....rather than regarding disputes over terminology, language registers, or genre as divisive and debilitating, it is more useful to view such disagreements as playing a vital role in the process of formulating religious identity. (216)

This again brings missiology and contextualization into the picture; what exactly is “religious identity” and what really does the Bible say about it? But that is not Israel’s topic; undoubtedly, though, her presentation is of great importance (even is foundational) for such discussions.

In her concluding paragraph Israel calls for studies similar to hers to be carried on in the other major language areas of India. May it come to pass! This extensive review can do no better than close with the same sentence she closes with.

Rescuing the study of Bible translation from its present confines within theology and mission studies will benefit language and literary studies as well as theological engagements with the Bible in India. (220) **IJFM**

Endnotes

¹ I have written about one aspect of the failure to have a united vocabulary across India, looking at the different choices for “God” by translators in north and south India. See “Speaking of God in Sanskrit-Derived Vocabularies,” forthcoming.

² *Deva* is an example of a Sanskrit-based term that is slightly altered to become Protestant (on the pattern mentioned above). In Tamil the term carries a neuter signifier and is often used in the plural for many lesser gods, but for Protestants it was changed to masculine singular.

³ Henry Bower, the head of the revision committee that produced the Union Version of 1871 which introduced *deva* as the term for God, wrote, “The equivalent in Tamil for the Saxon word God would certainly be *kadavul* which in sound and significance is similar; for the meaning of *kadavul* is good. But this term is peculiar only to Tamil; whereas Devan (derived from a Sanskrit word signifying light) is common to all the Indian languages” (108; quoted from Paul Lawrence’s Nov. 4, 1926, Notes from the archives of the British and Foreign Bible Society).

⁴ The “instead” of this statement is to Bror Tiliander’s suggestion, against his own evidence, that *deva* probably was in wide use at that time. Tiliander’s 1974 study of *Christian and Hindu Terminology: Study in their Mutual Relations with Special Reference to the Tamil Area* is very helpful, but Israel points out a number of significant errors in his work.

⁵ Consistent with her academic approach, Israel refers to what I have called the Common Language Version as the *Tiruviviliyam*. Michael Bergunder has written an excellent analysis of this “Pure Tamil” common language version in Judith Brown and Robert Frykenberg (eds), *Christians, Cultural Interactions, and India’s Religious Traditions*, 2002, 212–231.

In Others' Words

Editor's note: In this department, we highlight resources outside of the IJFM: other journals, print resources, DVDs, web sites, blogs, videos, etc. Standard disclaimers on content apply. Due to the length of many web addresses, we sometimes give just the title of the resource, the main web address, or a suggested search phrase.

Games Might Help Us Discover Cultural Variation in Morals

In a fascinating article on psmag.com ("We Aren't the World"), Ethan Watters highlights how Joe Henrich and his colleagues at the University of British Columbia (UBC) are challenging many of the standard presuppositions of prior cross-cultural research. Henrich first used the "ultimatum game" (an economics game created to analyze core "fairness" values) among a group of Machiguenga Indians living north of Machu Picchu, Peru. He later persuaded two UBC psychologists to join him in researching small-scale societies all over the world, this time using a series of different "fairness" games. We invite you to take a look at this article, reading it with a missiological mind. Related to this issue of *IJFM*, what are the implications for understanding moralnet (Sally Dye) or conscience (Higgins)? We thank Leith and Andrea Gray for pointing out this article.

How Does Culture Change Concepts such as "Self," "Family" or "Trauma"?

Ethan Watters is also the author of the acclaimed psychology text *Crazy Like Us: The Globalization of the American Psyche* (2011), which is useful for missionaries interested in trauma and cross-cultural mental health. His themes include the dangers of exporting our assumptions about the nature, expression, and solutions to mental illness to the rest of the world. He relates that, in the wake of the 2004 tsunami in Sri Lanka, one Sri Lankan mental health professional was forced to warn his parliament about post-tsunami "parachute researchers" and "globe-trotting trauma counselors."

What is Missiology After All, and Does It Have a Future?

One highlight among the many articles reassessing missiology this year is Dwight Baker's contribution in *IBMR*'s January 2014 issue. Baker offers a significant distinction between missiology (as an "interested" discipline) and the broad field of mission studies: "Missiology as an Interested Discipline, and Where Is It Happening?" By "interested," he means that missiology should have a bias towards praxis, the achieving of something, the fulfilling of a purpose that involves reaching the nations—in short, missiology should be a discipline "with skin on it." Baker wraps much more into this original and brilliant overview of missiology. Don't miss it!

Why is Lausanne '74 So Important?

"The most important missiological breakthrough of the twentieth century was the awareness that the Great Commission texts

were about discipling entire nations and bringing the Gospel to every people group on the earth." (Tim Tennent). In an online newsletter dated July 16, 2014, the Lausanne Movement posted fourteen different resources about the original Lausanne '74 International Consultation on World Evangelization. Five of the links are to contributions from a new 2014 Regnum Publications book called *The Lausanne Movement: A Range of Perspectives*. For a simple yet elegant explanation of each of the main articles of the Lausanne Covenant, and an outstanding summary of its missiological implications, see Tim Tennent's chapter entitled "Lausanne and Global Evangelicalism: Theological Distinctives and Missiological Impact." For an excellent summary of the Lausanne Covenant's treatment of Gospel and Culture which addresses what some participants saw as lacking in Lausanne '74, see Tite Tienou's "Gospel and Culture in the Lausanne Movement." Tienou gives a nuanced understanding of the value of Western missionaries yet the inescapable influence of colonialism; he also gives us a useful and succinct history of the coining of the term "contextualization." Search for "40th anniversary" on lausanne.org for these and other documents. For the original speeches and responses, including Donald McGavran's "The Dimensions of World Evangelization" with which Tienou takes issue, and Ralph D. Winter's "The Highest Priority: Cross-Cultural Evangelism," use search term "1974."

The ISFM 2014 to Meet in Atlanta

The ISFM (International Society for Frontier Missiology) will celebrate the 40th Anniversary of Lausanne '74 at its annual meetings September 23-25, 2014 at the headquarters of Operation Mobilization, in Tyrone, Georgia (just outside of Atlanta). Everyone is invited to attend. The focus will be forward-looking as we discuss the next 40 years of world evangelization. (See ad on back cover.)

Are Islamists Just a More Violent Version of the Protestant Reformation?

In his July 14, 2014 blog (*The Anxious Bench*, patheos.com), Philip Jenkins comments on David Motadel's review of a 2013 book by James Noyes, (*The Politics of Iconoclasm: Religion, Violence and the Culture of Image-Breaking in Christianity and Islam*). Jenkins is very clear that his subject is a narrow one comparing religious violence to sacred objects but he draws a useful although uncomfortable comparison between the radical Protestant Reformers (think Calvin) and the radical Islamists (think ISIS). History at its best can be disturbing. Departing from just the treatment of sacred images in Iraq, the treatment of human beings cannot get worse. Patriarch Louis Rafael I Sako has denounced ISIS as worse than Genghis Khan (www.ncregister.com) and comparisons to holocausts and other horrific ethnic cleansings are unavoidable. See *The Anchoress* blog on patheos.com. **IJFM**

Editor's Note: This January–March 2014 issue is partly composed of material created later in 2014. We apologize in advance for any inconvenience caused by such anachronisms.

Related Perspectives Lesson and Section

Whether you're a Perspectives instructor, student, or coordinator, you can continue to explore issues raised in the course reader and study guide in greater depth in **IJFM**. For ease of reference, each **IJFM** article in the table below is tied thematically to one or more of the 15 Perspectives lessons, divided into four sections: Biblical (B), Historical (H), Cultural (C) and Strategic (S). *Disclaimer: The table below shows where the content of a given article might fit; it does not imply endorsement of a particular article by the editors of the Perspectives materials.* For sake of space, the table only includes lessons related to the articles in a given **IJFM** issue. To learn more about the Perspectives course, including a list of classes, visit www.perspectives.org.

Articles in **IJFM 31:1**

	Lesson 5: Unleashing the Gospel (B)	Lesson 7: Eras of Mission History (H)	Lesson 10: How Shall They Hear? (C)	Lesson 11: Building Bridges of Love (C)	Lesson 13: The Spontaneous Multiplication of Churches (S)	Lesson 14: Pioneer Church Planting (S)
Biblical Absolutes and Cultural Variation T. Wayne Dye (pp. 5–14)	X		X			X
Cultural Variation in Conscience: Part of God's Design Sally Folger Dye (pp. 15–25)	X		X	X		
At Table in the Idol's Temple? Local Theology, Idolatry, and Identification in 1 Corinthians 8–10 Kevin Higgins (pp. 27–36)	X				X	X
The Triune God and the Plethora of Religions: The Holy Spirit in Mission Scott W. Sunquist (pp. 37–42)	X		X			X
Book Review of <i>Religious Transactions in Colonial South India: Language, Translation and the Making of Protestant Identity</i> H. L. Richard (pp. 48–53)	X	X	X	X		X



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