

## The Difference That Difference Makes: Culture, Religion, and Diversity in Post-Modern Society

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Theology is a systematic description and explanation of the way things really are, the way God sees them, and we will speak of this as "Theology" with a capital *T*. At other times we use the term when we speak of human descriptions and explanations of reality that arise out of our study of the Bible. We will speak of this as "theology" with a small *t*. Too often we confuse the two. We think that our studies of the Bible are unbiased, that our own interpretations of the Scriptures are the only true ones. It disturbs us, therefore, when we begin to discover that theologies are influenced by culture. The very fact that we phrase our theology in English can prejudice our understanding of the Bible. There is no theologically unbiased language. The fact is, all theologies developed by human beings are shaped by their particular historical and cultural contexts—by the language they use and the questions they ask. All human theologies are only partial understandings of Theology as God sees it. We see through a glass darkly. . . . But the fact that we are humans and see through a glass darkly does *not* mean that we do not see at all. We can read the Scriptures and understand them. The central message of the gospel is clear: creation, sin, and redemption. Of these we can be certain. It is the fine details that we see less clearly. Paul Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries*, p. 198.

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Match the following cultural slang to their more proper English meaning equivalent

"Your steez are mad ill!"	<i>You are not nice at all</i>
"What time it is!"	<i>What a wonderful thing that was!</i>
"You're so dill — you blow!"	<i>I really like that song.</i>
"That was the biz bizzom bomb!"	<i>You are wrong on that point.</i>
"You are all up in my grill."	<i>I don't agree with that.</i>
"That's completely whack!"	<i>I have plenty of money.</i>
"That last jam was fat."	<i>Your clothes look really sharp.</i>
"I'm kickin' you to the curb."	<i>Hello, how are you doing?</i>
"Poof you!"	<i>I refuse to discuss this with you any further.</i>
"Talk to the hand!"	<i>You are too concerned with my affairs.</i>
"I've got mad scrilla!"	<i>Our relationship has to end now.</i>

## **Taking a Quick Tour of the World Today**

### **I. “What in the World are We doing?”: The World Today**

- A. If the world were made up of 100 people . . .
- B. The world is becoming urban
  - 1. Right now, there are 111,000 non-Christians becoming urban dwellers every single day (this number will triple within the next 30 years)
  - 2. In 1900 there were only 20 cities in the entire world over one million people; Today, there are 360 cities with over one million people
  - 3. By the year 2025, there will be 650 urban areas with more than one million people
  - 4. In 1900, approximately 20 million people lived in urban slums; Today, some 715 million are classified as urban slum dwellers. By 2025 over two billion people will live in urban slums and the total number of urban dwellers in poverty will be over three billion people.
  - 5. By the time I reach retirement age (i.e., 2025) one out of every three people on earth will be part of the urban poor, and three-fourths of the world’s total population will live in cities

### **II. The World of the Future: Dramatically Diverse, Thoroughly Urban**

- A. More than 360 cities of more than one million inhabitants, 250 can be said to be of worldwide significance
- B. Center of human population: Predicted numbers in terms of millions of the world’s ten largest agglomerations by the year 2000
  - 1. Mexico City--27.6 million people
  - 2. Sao Paulo--26 million
  - 3. Tokyo/Yokohama--24 million

4. New York area--23 million
  5. Shanghai--23 million
  6. Beijing--20 million
  7. Rio de Janeiro--19 million
  8. Greater Bombay--17 million
  9. Calcutta--17 million
  10. Jakarta--17 million
- C. Impossible to think reasonably of modern civilization without referring to great cities of the world--Washington, New York, Seoul, Cairo, Brasilia, Istanbul, Moscow, Stockholm, London, Paris, Buenos Aires, Amsterdam, Los Angeles, and so on. Cities are significant because of their strategic import
1. Cultural cities (leading the world in fashion, trends, and ideas) e.g., Paris, Oxford, Boston, San Francisco
  2. Political and Administrative cities (centers of worldwide decision making bodies, or which contain governments and their bureaucracies) e.g., Washington, Moscow, New Delhi
  3. Industrial cities (noisy, blue-collar, factory centers host to central manufacturing industries) e.g., Bombay, Sao Paulo, Chicago-Gary Area)
  4. Commercial cities (giant marketplaces or bazaars where goods and services are bartered and exchanged on a worldwide basis) e.g., New York, Hong Kong
  5. Symbolic cities (cities where great struggles are fought and settled and symbolized, or which represent issues of division, oppression, warfare, religious hatred, or freedom within their countries or to the rest of the world) e.g., Soweto, Belfast, Berlin, Beirut, Jerusalem
  6. Primary cities (cities which combine all of the preceding characteristics, and can be said to be the greatest of the great cities) e.g., Bangkok, Mexico City, London

- D. The cities of America are microcosms of the globe, filled with all the world's complicated diversity
1. Miami is the defacto capital of Latin America
  2. According to conservative estimates, at least one million Hispanics pour illegally over the 2400 mile border between Mexico and U.S. each year
  3. Los Angeles, with its 4.5 million Hispanics, is now the second largest Mexican city, while Houston is the fastest growing one
  4. Diverse populations make up the typical American city. Over 100 languages are spoken by the residents of Los Angeles, and four-fifths of all of Houston's schoolchildren are either Hispanic, Black, or Asian
  5. Twenty years ago, in May of 1982, a NY Times survey of Chinatown found refugees from every province of mainland China within a four block area in the middle of NY city
  6. Chicago has as many Native American's as all but the very largest reservations in the country, and more Poles than virtually any other place with the exception of Warsaw
  7. Most American cities of any size, (2 million or more) host diverse cultural and ethnic populations

### **III. The Concept of Difference: Culture**

“Culture is that integrated, well-established, and communally-defined patterns of behavior and worldview which influences the cognitive, affective, and evaluative dimensions of its expression”

- Learned Patterns
- Worldview and Behavior
- Cognitive, affective, and evaluative dimensions

- A. The Perils and Promise of Ministry in a Multicultural and Unchurched society
  - 1. Mind-boggling diversity
  - 2. Formidable interpersonal barriers
  - 3. Dramatic gaps in wealth and socio-economic reality
  - 4. Complex patterns of kinship relations
  - 5. Technological sophistication and richness
  - 6. Shifting, volatile ethical visions of the human good
  - 7. New Modern Dragons: The emergence of spiritually without God
  
- B. "The Dimensions of Culture"
  - 1. The Cognitive Dimension — "The knowledge shared by members of a group or society" (Hiebert, p. 30)
    - a. Arrangement of knowledge, categories, systems of meaning
    - b. What exists and what does not
    - c. Worldview and conceptual frameworks: cultures as systems of relationships which compose and dictate what we consider to be possible and real
      - (1) Ontology – the study of being
      - (2) Cosmology – the study of creation
      - (3) Epistemology – the study of knowing
    - d. Assumptions and beliefs we make about reality, the nature of the world, and how it works

- e. Storage
  - (1) Print
  - (2) Oral
  - (3) Technology
  - (4) Story
  - (5) Art
  
- 2. The Affective Dimension — “feelings people have, with their attitudes, notions of beauty, tastes in food and dress, likes and dislikes, and ways of enjoying themselves or experiencing sorrow” (Hiebert, p. 32)
  - a. Expression of emotions
  - b. Ubiquitous — seen in virtually all areas of life
  - c. “Expressive culture:” art, literature, music, dance, drama
  
- 3. The Evaluative Dimension — “values by which [a culture] judges human relationships to be moral or immoral”
  - a. Three spheres of evaluative judgment
    - (1) Truth-falsehood claims
    - (2) Beauty-ugliness claims
    - (3) Right-wrong claims
  - b. Moral codes: The power of ultimate concern, and sacredness in human society
  
- C. Manifestations of Culture
  - 1. Behavior — customs, products, and languages learned as symbol systems of forms and learned meaning
    - a. Form
    - b. Meaning
    - c. Symbol

2. Products — material objects, lived environments
3. Explicit beliefs and value systems — all of those forms whereby we through practice, ritual, tradition, and structure embody, articulate, and celebrate our worldview
  - a. Aesthetics
  - b. Politics
  - c. Religion
  - d. Kinship relations
  - e. Social organizations
  - f. Economics
  - g. Technology
  - h. Etc.

#### **IV. The Implications of Cultural Difference in Ministry to the Unchurched and to Diverse Populations**

- A. The differences between people are important ( $C^1$ ,  $C^2$ ,  $C^3$  contexts)
  1. God created difference, Acts 17
  2. The Kingdom will reflect difference, Rev. 5.9-10
- B. The differences between peoples are real
  1. What we share in common (e.g., the *imago Dei*) is more significant than the superficial differences which separate us
  2. Our differences, nonetheless, are viewed as critical and significant, not to be ignored or eclipsed by some generic culture (cf. John 1.14-18)

- C. The differences between people are significant
  - 1. These differences are more than cosmetic.
  - 2. They have profound implications for how people think, act, feel, and what they value and strive for. (Example - white and black differences in perception during the O.J. Simpson trial).
  
- D. The differences between people are not necessarily bad or wrong
  - 1. Every culture has elements that are moral, i.e. consistent with the way that God desires us to think and act. (Examples - punishment for murder, care for children, etc.)
  - 2. Every culture has elements that are immoral, i.e. inconsistent with or opposed to the way that God desires us to think and act. (Examples - infanticide of female offspring, pursuit of material wealth as an ultimate value).
  - 3. Every culture has elements that are amoral, i.e. differences arising from taste, custom, tradition, and habit. (Examples - eating tacos, wearing hats, speaking English, dancing at weddings).
  
- E. The difference between people tend to alienate and divide groups
  - 1. Our differences tend to divide us because we are ethnocentric, we prefer our own culture and tend to judge others in light of it.
  - 2. Anthropological roots of division.
    - a. The enormous power of enculturation.
    - b. The hidden nature of culture.
    - c. We love those who are like us.
    - d. Culture Shock: The unsettling effects of operating outside of our own class, culture, or sub-culture.



3. Theological roots of the division
    - a. We tend to place ourselves at the center of the universe
    - b. We forget or ignore what God is doing in the world regarding the building of his kingdom on earth.
    - c. We fail to shift our loyalties from our own national, cultural, and class framework to the vision of God's new humanity in Christ.
  4. We close off our hearts to God's love for all people.
  5. We reject the notion that you need not change culture in order to become Christian and be Christ's people.
- F. Our differences may erect barriers and cause us to treat people differently

When differences are allowed to divide, we typically respond to others in three inappropriate ways

1. We become paternalistic: "help the poor native syndrome"  
  
*Our benevolent expression of assumed superiority often results in an attempt to modify the actions, and values of a differing group (Example - missionaries issuing Western clothing to South Pacific islanders).*
2. In suspicion, we isolate and separate ourselves from people who are different.  
  
*The passive expression of my group's prejudice through the deliberate limiting of contact between my group and the people, actions, and values of the group that is different. (Example- segregated neighborhoods).*
3. In hatred and malice, we reject the other culture as bad or evil or undeserving, and seek to undermine and persecute it.  
  
*The active expression of my group's hatred for the people, actions, and values of the group that is different. (Example- ethnic cleansing in Bosnia or Rwanda, the Holocaust in Germany, etc.)*

## **V. A Biblical Theology of Culture**

- A. Culture is intrinsic to the creation of God
  - 1. God as the author of human life (Gen. 1-2)
  - 2. God's creation mandate as an intrinsic blessing of human creative cultural production
    - a. Be stewards of the earth: tools, technology, shaping environment
    - b. Go and multiply: kinship, social organization, structure
  
- B. The differences between peoples have now been acknowledged and reconciled in the ministry of Christ
  - 1. Our differences are now reconciled through the work of Christ on the cross.
    - a. Between Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female, barbarian and Sycythian, Ephesians 2; Col. 3.11; Gal. 3.28
    - b. God is reconciled with all people now in his Son, 2 Cor. 5.18-21
    - c. We share in both the guilt and the glory, Romans 3; 1.16-17
  - 2. The goal of redemption is Christlikeness, not cultural sameness. (The goal is always to help people become more like Jesus, not more like us.)
    - a. Colossians 3.11 and Galatians 3.28 do not advocate the obliteration of cultural identity, only the end of ungodly partiality
    - b. Culture has been redeemed in the incarnation of Jesus, 1 John 1.1-3

3. Our differences are displayed and celebrated in the one, holy, apostolic, and universal Church of Jesus Christ
  - a. A New Humanity in the Church
  - b. Diverse, yet one: although we are many members made up of every kindred, tribe, people, and nation, from every language and clan, from every class and culture, we nevertheless are one body in Christ. We are to strive to make this unity visible in our daily lives and relationships.
  - c. In redemption God does not erase, shield, or obliterate our differences, but rather he acknowledges and rejoices in them (Acts 15).
  - d. While we retain our differences, we now in Christ through the *koinonia* (fellowship) we have with God and each other.
    - (1) We share a common parentage
    - (2) We share a common calling
    - (3) We share a common destiny
4. Our differences are overcome in the unity of Christ for the purpose of the ministry of reconciliation
  - a. We express the love of God in our reconciled relationships, making the gospel attractive to unbelievers, John 13.34-35
  - b. We are reconciled to call the world to be reconciled to God in Christ (2 Cor. 5.18-21)
  - c. Our differences allow us to penetrate every culture and people group with the gospel, and make disciples and plant churches wherever Christ has yet to be heard and followed.

C. The primacy of the Incarnation of the Son of God

1. Jesus' enfleshment demonstrates the moral neutrality of culture (John 1.14-18)

2. Jesus complete identification with humankind at the most intimate level (e.g., he thought in Hebrew, Hebrews 4.14ff.)
  3. Jesus took on the nature of humanity in full for the sake of both revelation and redemption
    - a. Jesus as Perfect Revelation shows that humankind is a vessel through which God can be perfectly understood (Col. 2.6-10; John 1.18; 2 Cor. 4.6)
    - b. Jesus as Perfect Redemption shows that humankind can offer to God in Christ what God demands (Phil. 2.5-11; 1 Pet. 3.18; 1 Tim. 2.5-6)
  4. Jesus elevates the meaning of human culture; through the Incarnation, culture is embraced, (John 4)
- D. The significance of the Jerusalem Council
1. The Petrine faux pas: Cornelius's band and Gentile salvation (Acts 10-11)
  2. The Jerusalem Council rejoinder, Acts 15
    - a. No need to shift cultures: God speaks in and through culture
    - b. One can retain one's cultural distinctiveness while embracing the pursuit of Christlikeness
    - c. All cultures are equally viable in the Christian worldview (culture is valid, cultures are relative)

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“The biblical principle of cultural neutrality, which encouraged indigenous leadership in every culture, allowed the gospel of Christ to become universally applicable. It set the stage for the Church’s worldwide missionary efforts. Soon Philip and Paul began to evangelize and plant churches among non-Jewish peoples who have never heard of Christ. Their example is relevant to our inner-city today.” — Keith Phillips, *Out of Ashes*, p. 103.

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- E. The Apostolic Burden: Becoming All Things to All Human Beings
  - 1. The burden is on the messenger not those who receive the message to change, 1 Cor. 9.19-22
  - 2. God is already among people, having providentially arranged the peoples as he determined, Acts 17
  - 3. Receive others as Christ has received you, Romans 15.6ff.

## **VI. Decoding and Encoding the Message of God in a Multicultural and Unchurched Society**

Correlating the timeless message of God with the timely task of embodying and proclaiming the Word of God effectively within contemporary society

### A. Decode God's Meaning: Become a Disciple of Jesus Yourself

Embracing and embodying the message of God thoroughly and completely in one's own life in preparation to teach others (Luke 6.40)

- 1. The challenge of the fitness of the hearer and the messenger: Who we are as individual disciples and as congregations in the society (i.e., her character, her competence, her compassion, her clarity, her calling)
  - a. To be a living epistle (2 Cor. 3)
  - b. To display the glory (Matt. 5)
  - c. To set the spiritual pace (1 Cor. 11)
  - d. To watch herself and her teaching (1 Tim. 4)
- 2. The challenge of the broadness of the message: What we teach and proclaim to the world regarding Christ and his Kingdom
  - a. The Word of God in the person of Jesus Christ

- b. The Gospel of Grace
- c. The Vision of the Kingdom of God

B. Encode God's Message: Become an Ambassador for Christ where you are

*Communicating and enfleshing the truth of the Kingdom within a receiving culture in such a manner that they hear God's voice as you speak*

1. Admit your own latent ethnocentrism; acknowledge and respect the differences that exist between us, Acts 10
2. Pay the price to learn the language and symbol systems of those you serve and minister to, e.g., John 1.1
3. Adopt a listening lifestyle and a learner's demeanor (i.e., do your homework by learning of the history and culture of the people you will serve), 1 Cor. 9.19ff
4. Begin at the beginning. Start on a small scale with modest expectations. (Reconciled relationships take prolonged time and effort), Ephesians 4.1-3
5. Don't be overcome by initial suspicion and rejection. Your motives will be questioned, so don't give up, Gal. 6.7-10
6. Recognize that relationship must be reciprocal; earn the right to be heard by not foisting your agenda on other peoples, 1 John 1.1-4
7. Separate culture norms from biblical mandates, e.g., 1 Cor. 12-14
8. Exercise prudence in speech and action. One cultural faux pas can have devastating consequences, Prov. 22.3

9. Do not demand that people from other cultures join your own in order to be disciples of Christ, Gal. 5.1; 2 Cor. 3.17
10. Live in biblical freedom: apply biblical principles, and do not elevate cultural platitudes (The 1 Corinthian 6-8-10 principles)
11. Recognize the universal nature of the Kingdom of God, and shift your loyalty. Get in step with what God's universal, global, and historical plan is for the Church of Jesus Christ. Become a world Christian while serving here in your local assembly, Matt. 28.18-20
12. Pray that God will guide you in the process and enable you to be effective in understanding and service, Matt. 7.7

The Bottom Line: \_\_\_\_\_