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TH/EC 3300is

Introduction to Missional Theology

Reflection Paper #3

“Gospel, Culture, and the Missio Dei”

December 4, 2009
Jesus was a Jew. This fact, as simple as it is, would have come as a shock to many Christians throughout the ages. It is ironic that, for many, it is easier to imagine Jesus as the Son of God, the second member of the Eternal Triune Godhead—and all that entails—than as a Jewish carpenter’s son, who grew up in the back country of Palestine and who did not, despite the many portrayals to the contrary, have blonde hair and blue eyes. In the words of Karl Barth, “The Word did not simply become any ‘flesh’… it became Jewish flesh.”\(^1\) And yet, Jesus did not come to bring salvation to the Jews only. Rather, “through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus” (Ephesians 3:6). In Jesus, God’s “universal purpose of blessing [is] wrought out through specific acts at specific times and places and involving particular people.”\(^2\) This scandal of particularity reveals the essential paradox between gospel and culture. The gospel comes clothed in cultural garb, and yet the gospel is not to be equated with any single culture. Jesus lived as a Jew, and yet, very early on the church declared that the gospel is not to be equated with Jewish culture (Acts 15). Likewise, Peter asserted that “God is no respecter of persons… anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him” (Acts 10:34-35)—whether Jew or Gentile. This paper will explore the nature of the relationship between the gospel and culture, particularly in the context of contemporary American Evangelicalism. After a few words on the nature of human culture generally, it will explore what I call the dialectic of translation: namely, that all cultures can bear the gospel (destigmatization), yet no single culture owns the gospel (non-normativity). Next,

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It will use the concepts of “indigenizing principle” and “pilgrim principle” to illustrate the tension inherent in living out the gospel in the midst of culture. Finally, it will advocate an understanding of the church’s mission within the broader context of the Missio Dei as a corrective to the temptation of “cultural pretentiousness” (31).

It will not do to embark on an analysis of culture without first attempting some degree of conceptual clarity. The word “culture” in popular usage is ambiguous at best. In this essay, culture does not refer specifically to music, art, entertainment, and the like (i.e. “popular culture”), nor does it refer to such hot-button issues as are connoted by the term “culture wars.” Rather, “human culture is simply the way in which human societies order their corporate life… culture is human behavior in its corporate aspect.” Culture is embodied in innumerable ways, the chief among which is language. “Language is the intimate, articulate expression of culture, and so close are the two that language can be said to be commensurate with culture, which it suffuses and embodies” (3). Therefore, there is no culture-less human. Any human who acts and communicates does so within the context of culture. As such, culture is both neutral and ubiquitous.

Yet, while culture, in itself, is neutral (morally and spiritually), not all cultures or cultural manifestations are neutral. When confronted by the gospel, culture becomes relativized. In the knowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, any aspect of corporate human life that does not represent Christ’s purposes for creation and redemption are laid low and judged by the gospel of Christ. And yet, “there is not and cannot be a gospel which is not

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5 Newbigin, 185,188.
culturally embodied.” The difficulty lies in discerning which aspects of corporate human life are in line with the gospel, which ones are at odds with the gospel, and when they are at odds, choosing the gospel rather than our own cultural presuppositions. This can only be accomplished by “vigorous engagement of culture by the gospel, accompanied by critical reflection on that process.”

One question remains: “How can one criticize ones own culture from the inside?” As a critic of Lesslie Newbigin once said, isn’t that a bit like “pretending to move a bus when you are sitting in it?” In a sense, this is very true. When cultural values are taken for granted, left unquestioned, it is possible to read those values into the gospel itself. In the early Middle Ages, when honor and shame were the chief cultural values, Anselm’s satisfaction theory of atonement made complete sense. In contemporary America, honor and shame have been replaced by tolerance (leading to a gospel of vague universalism) and/or prosperity (leading to a gospel of material blessings for the faithful).

The process of unshackling the gospel from cultural distortions is best confronted by a robust principle of translatability. Translation is a “fundamental vernacular reconstruction of the message” (60). Translation takes place at the linguistic level but also at the broader cultural level; this has been a hallmark of the Christian movement. “Christianity was born in a cross-cultural milieu, with translation as its birthmark” (49). Evidence of the translatability of the gospel is written directly into the scriptures themselves, as John used the Stoic conception of the *logos* to articulate who Jesus was in a way that the Gentiles could understand (John 1:1). The act of translating the message

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6 Newbigin, 189.  
8 Newbigin, 191.
of the gospel initiates a dialectic process through which two things occur. This process is repeated whenever the gospel is communicated across cultures, and in so doing it “places God at the center and cultures at the periphery.” First, the culture to which the gospel is translated is destigmatized: it is shown to be a legitimate bearer of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Second, the culture from which the gospel is translated is relativized: it is shown to be non-normative for the expression of the gospel. We will examine each of these aspects in turn.

The theological basis for the destigmatization of cultures lies in the Book of Acts, which tells the story of the amazing growth of the early church, characterized by the radical openness to the gospel encountered by the apostles among the Gentiles. Whereas the Jews were less often willing to accept Jesus as Lord because of their cultural and religious presuppositions, the Gentiles were, perhaps unexpectedly, fertile soil for evangelization. “Thanks to the unimpeachable evidence that Gentiles were unreservedly accepted before God—a fact vindicated by the sending down of the Spirit at Pentecost—cultural favoritism lost its moral rationale. No one dared repudiate what God declared accepted” (51).

This destigmatization of culture is most vividly portrayed in the 17th chapter of Acts. Paul, the former Pharisee and “Hebrew of Hebrews” (Philippians 3:5), addresses the Athenian philosophers, and instead of quoting the Hebrew Scriptures, he quotes their own poets. In doing so, Paul used the Greek philosophy as a cultural “coefficient” (73, quoting Harnack) with which to combine the gospel in order to proclaim the lordship of Christ.

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As the center of gravity in the global church shifts southward, from Europe and North America to Asia, Africa, and South America, this lesson of destigmatization is vitally important. Historically, resistance to new cultural manifestations of the gospel has hampered the process of translation. “Because the measuring rod was Western sensibilities, it was non-Western cultures that were stigmatized.”\textsuperscript{10} Ironically, whereas “great cultural and historical distance separates the early church and the modern Western church…contemporary Asian, African, and Latin American Christians have considerable affinity with those of the first and second centuries”\textsuperscript{11} and may be in a better position to contribute helpful theological concepts for today’s world.

That all cultures are uniquely able to bear the gospel is accompanied by another aspect of translatability: “no one [culture] is the exclusive or normative standard for anyone else, and no one culture is God’s exclusive favorite” (35). This is the principle of non-normativity. As noted in the previous paragraph, the center of gravity in church is shifting southward. “The fact that Christianity has continued to surge beyond its Western colonial phase suggests the nonabsoluteness of the Western cultural hegemony” (12). Western Christians must recognize this as sociological fact, and embrace it. After all, the gospel is not an American phenomena; it is bigger, wider and deeper than that. “The universal, omnipotent God can dispense with a universal, omnipotent culture” (74). And yet, the temptation is always present “to reify one culture and make it the standard for judging Christian faith and practice in other culture.”\textsuperscript{12} Translation confronts this temptation directly by equipping other cultural manifestations of the gospel to challenge one’s own. This is what happened with the apostle Paul. “Paul…was in radical tension

\textsuperscript{10} Shenk, 122.
\textsuperscript{11} Shenk 121.
\textsuperscript{12} Shenk 119-120.
with his own cultural roots, not because those roots were unsound but because the Gentile breakthrough cast a shadow over any claims of cultural favoritism, Jewish or other” (28). For Paul as for us, “the culture of the message bearer [acquires] a peripheral status once the step [is] taken to engage another culture religiously” (30).

If all cultures can legitimately bear the gospel, and no one culture exclusively embodies the gospel, “we have to say both ‘God accepts human culture’ and also ‘God judges human culture.’” Andrew Walls articulates this tension in terms of the “indigenizing principle” and the “pilgrim principle.” The “indigenizing principle” means that God accepts people where they are, “together with our group relations, with that cultural conditioning that makes us feel at home in one part of human society and less at home in another.” Concretely, this means that if you are an African, and an American evangelist shares the gospel with you, and you believe it, you no more have to become a Westerner than you have to become a butterfly. This does not mean, however, that the gospel can become the center of one’s life without challenging aspects of that life. “Not only does God in Christ take people as they are, he takes them in order to transform them into what he wants them to be. Along with the indigenizing principle which makes his faith a place to feel at home, the Christian inherits the pilgrim principle, which whispers to him that he has no abiding city and warns him that to be faithful to Christ will put him out of stop with his society; for that society never existed in East or West, ancient time or modern, which could absorb the word of Christ painlessly into its system.” Christians in this world have an ambivalent relationship with culture. They cannot simply avoid culture, as if that were possible, nor can they create a “Christian culture”—for

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13 Newbigin, 195.
14 Walls, 137.
15 Walls, 139.
Christianity is by its very nature multi-cultural. Christians are called to embody the gospel from within their cultural framework, but also to never identify aspects of their cultural framework as exclusively normative aspects of the gospel of Jesus Christ. This is not a new revelation. An early second century document explains the Christian’s place in the world the following way:

“For Christians cannot be distinguished from the rest of the human race by country or language or customs. They do not live in cities of their own; they do not use a peculiar form of speech; they do not follow an eccentric manner of life… they live in Greek and barbarian cities alike… and follow the customs of the country in clothing and food and other matters of daily living, at the same time they give proof of the remarkable and admittedly extraordinary constitution of their commonwealth. They live in their own countries but as aliens. They have a share in everything as citizens, and endure everything as foreigners. Every foreign land is their fatherland, and yet for them every fatherland is a foreign land.”

It has thus far been argued that culture, as a combination of the corporate ways of living within a community, can bear the gospel but cannot do so exclusively. It has also been argued that the dialectical process of translation directly challenges the idolatry of culture above God by relativizing the culture of the message bearer and destigmatizing the culture of the one who receives the message. From a detached, analytical perspective, it is easy to affirm these processes as desirable. And yet, to have one’s own culture relativized can be a scary thing. As a middle-class American evangelical Christian, I know that the culturally embodied gospel that I received brings new life and confronts sin and death—to say the same thing about a Chinese communist embodiment of the gospel is not as easy. The difficulty of translation is that it involves a tremendous amount of risk.

As one allows the gospel to be embodied in a new culture, one does not want it to change so much that it is no longer recognizable as gospel. Lamin Sanneh articulates this risk poignantly: “When one translates, it is like pulling the trigger of a loaded gun: the translator cannot recall the hurtling bullet” (60). For those Christians who want to endorse the translation of the gospel across cultures, and yet who are trigger-shy to do so, a new way of thinking about the gospel is necessary.

Because of the risk involved, one will not willingly encourage the translation process unless one has trust that God will not allow the gospel to be lost in the process. An affirmation is necessary, that God is in control of the spread of the gospel. That means that human beings are not primarily, but only derivatively, responsible. “Karl Barth… became one of the first theologians to articulate mission as an activity of God himself.”\textsuperscript{17} His articulation of the Missio Dei put the mission of the church in the “context of the doctrine of the Trinity…The classical doctrine on the missio dei as God the Father sending the Son, and God the Father and Son sending the Spirit was expanded to include yet another ‘movement’: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit sending the church into the world.”\textsuperscript{18} Seen from this angle, “the missiones ecclesia…the missionary ventures of the church”\textsuperscript{19} derive their nature and power from God’s salvific purposes. Grounding the relationship between gospel and culture in the framework of the Missio Dei means that if God has chosen to act through particular cultures for universal purposes (remember, Jesus was a Jew), far be it for the church to assume that their own culture is indeed the pinnacle and end of the gospel’s continuous translation process.

\textsuperscript{18} Bosch, 390.
\textsuperscript{19} Bosch, 10.
In the end, despite the risk involved, the translation of the gospel from culture to culture is a process by which, more often then not, the message is not lost but rediscovered. “Translation forces a distinction between the truth of the message and its accompanying mode of cultural conveyance, with the presupposition that a separation of message and medium must challenge believers to uphold the primacy of the message against its cultural packaging” (36). By the grace of God, and only by the grace of God does the gospel come through the ages, clothed as it is in cultural garb, and find its place in the heart of every believer.
Bibliography


