

Missionaries can only make their message clear if they are recognized as credible messengers. How can missionaries from foreign cultures be received as trustworthy?

Ever since Paul's day, missionaries have been learning about effective relationships that span the gap between cultures. Forming relationships is essential to conveying the message in other cultures. This lesson explores how to form and extend those important relationships within different social structures.

Christ is our model. His incarnation is a tremendous pattern of identifying with the human condition and culture. Foreigners may be tolerated, but not trusted, unless they are accepted in some way as "belongers" with some understandable role in the society. How much of a "belonger" can outsiders become? Is it possible to so thoroughly identify with a new culture that people perceive the missionary as one of them? We'll find that identification has its limits. With Christ-like attitudes, however, missionaries have been learning how to humble themselves as "learners" before they assert themselves as communicators.

We'll see that the most effective communicators in any society are not missionaries, but local people who were born in that culture. Not every person communicates with equal power to others of their own society. We'll examine the fascinating possibilities of initiating gospel communication with the people who have the highest potential to lead many of their people to believe and obey Christ.

Ultimately, missionaries are not successful because they recognize intricate sociological structures or because they have mastered the local language. It is their love that opens the way for their speech. That love becomes the authentication of Christ's love. The heart of mission work is building bridges of love.

### **Received**

Jesus framed the first mission very simply: "The one who receives you receives Me." It was more critical that His messengers were received than believed. The gospel has always been more than a message; it is an introduction to life under Christ's lordship. When His messengers have connected with others in significant relationships, Christ can be introduced in powerful ways.

## **I. A Biblical Model: Incarnation**

The writers of the Willowbank Report have summarized the core issues of missionary humility and identity around the life and ongoing ministry of Jesus. When Jesus said, "As the Father has sent Me, I also send you" (John 20:21), He was not only expressing that we would be sent with the same purpose or that the ways of God mandating and guiding us would be similar, He was also saying that we should look to fulfill our ministry in the same way that Jesus accomplished His. How can we follow Jesus in His marvelous humility?

## A. An Analysis of Missionary Humility

When considering cross-cultural communication, there are five aspects of humility worth considering:

1. **Challenged by the Importance and Difficulty**

The task of cross-cultural communication requires special effort to see beyond the limits of our own culture.

2. **Need to Understand**

Take the trouble to understand, appreciate, and enter into dialogue with the cultures to which we go.

3. **Start Where People Are**

Humility seeks to begin with the needs and issues that the recipient people feel are important.

4. **Recognize Locals**

Humility recognizes the superior potential of local Christians to communicate in their culture.

5. **Trust the Spirit**

Humility relies on the Holy Spirit to do what we can never do: open the eyes of the blind and reveal Jesus.

## B. Incarnation as a Model

With the source and model of humility found in Christ Himself, we are open to considering two large areas: sacrifice and service. Or, to use different words, renunciation and identification. Meditate on these crucial matters. How important is it to emulate our Lord in these ways to advance the gospel?

1. **Renunciation**

Jesus renounced status, independence, and immunity.

2. **Identification**

Jesus took on our full situation. His example challenges our lifestyles and attitudes. The incarnation teaches identification without loss of identity.

Read the Lausanne Committee, "The Willowbank Report: Wanted: Humble Messengers of the Gospel!" section before "Conversion And Culture"

# Start of Reading: The Willowbank Report: Wanted: Humble Messengers of the Gospel!

We believe that the principal key to persuasive Christian communication is to be found in the communicators themselves and what kind of people they are. It should go without saying that they need to be people of Christian faith, love and holiness. That is, they must have a personal and growing experience of the transforming power of the Holy Spirit, so that the image of Jesus Christ is ever more clearly seen in their character and attitudes. Above all else we desire to see in them, and especially in ourselves, “the meekness and gentleness of Christ” (2 Cor 10:1); in other words, the humble sensitivity of Christ’s love. So important do we believe this to be that we are devoting the whole of this section of our Report to it. Moreover, since, we have no wish to point the finger at anybody but ourselves, we shall use the first person plural throughout. First, we give an analysis of Christian humility in a missionary situation; and secondly, we turn to the Incarnation of God in Jesus Christ as the model we desire by his grace to follow.

## An Analysis of Missionary Humility

First, there is the humility to acknowledge the problem which culture presents, and not to avoid or over-simplify it. As we have seen, different cultures have strongly influenced the biblical revelation, ourselves, and the people to whom we go. As a result, we have several personal limitations in communicating the gospel. For we are prisoners (consciously or unconsciously) of our own culture, and our grasp of the cultures, both of the Bible and of the country in which we serve, is very imperfect. It is the interaction between all these cultures which constitutes the problem of communication; it humbles all who wrestle with it.

Secondly, there is the humility to take the trouble to understand and appreciate the culture of those to whom we go. It is this desire which leads naturally into that true dialogue “whose purpose is to listen sensitively in order to understand” (Lausanne Covenant, para. 4). We repent of the ignorance which assumes that we have all the answers and that our only role is to teach. We have very much to learn. We repent also of judgmental attitudes. We know we should never condemn or despise another culture, but rather respect it. We advocate neither the arrogance which imposes our culture on others, nor the syncretism which mixes the gospel with cultural elements incompatible with it, but rather a humble sharing of the good news —made possible by the mutual respect of a genuine friendship.

Thirdly, there is the humility to begin our communication where people actually are and not where we would like them to be. This is what we see Jesus doing, and we desire to follow his example. Too often we have ignored people’s fears and frustrations, their pains and preoccupations, and their hunger, poverty, deprivation or oppression, in fact their “felt needs,” and have been too slow to rejoice or to weep with them. We acknowledge that these “felt needs” may sometimes be symptoms of deeper needs which are not immediately felt or recognized by the people. A doctor does not necessarily accept a patient’s self-diagnosis. Nevertheless, we see the need to begin where people are, but not to stop there. We accept our responsibility to

gently and patiently lead them on to see themselves, as we see ourselves, as rebels to whom the gospel directly speaks with a message of pardon and hope. To begin where people are not is to share an irrelevant message; to stay where people are and never lead them on to the fulness of God's good news, is to share a truncated gospel. The humble sensitivity of love will avoid both errors.

Fourthly, there is the humility to recognize that even the most gifted, dedicated and experienced missionary can seldom communicate the gospel in another language or culture as effectively as a trained local Christian. This fact has been acknowledged in recent years by the Bible Societies, whose policy has changed from publishing translations by missionaries (with help from local people) to training mother-tongue specialists to do the translating. Only local Christians can answer the questions, "God, how would you say this in our language?" and "God, what will obedience to you mean in our culture?" Therefore, whether we are translating the Bible or communicating the gospel, local Christians are indispensable. It is they who must assume the responsibility to contextualize the gospel in their own languages and cultures. Would-be cross-cultural witnesses are not on that account necessarily superfluous; but we shall be welcome only if we are humble enough to see good communication as a team enterprise, in which all believers collaborate as partners.

Fifthly, there is the humility to trust in the Holy Spirit of God, who is always the chief communicator, who alone opens the eyes of the blind and brings people to new birth. "Without his witness, ours is futile" (Lausanne Covenant, para. 14).

## Incarnation as Model for Christian Witness

We have met for our Consultation within a few days of Christmas, which might be called the most spectacular instance of cultural identification in the history of mankind, since by his Incarnation the Son became a first-century Galilean Jew.

We have also remembered that Jesus intended his people's mission in the world to be modeled on his own. "As the Father has sent me, even so I send you," he said (John 20:21; cf. 17:18). We have asked ourselves, therefore, about the implications of the Incarnation for all of us. The question is of special concern to cross-cultural witnesses, whatever country they go to, although we have thought particularly of those from the West who serve in the Third World.

Meditating on Philippians 2, we have seen that the self-humbling of Christ began in his mind: "he did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped." So we are commanded to let his mind be in us, and in humility of mind to "count" others better or more important than ourselves. This "mind" or "perspective" of Christ is a recognition of the infinite worth of human beings and of the privilege it is to serve them. Those witnesses who have the mind of Christ will have a profound respect for the people they serve, and for their cultures.

Two verbs then indicate the action to which the mind of Christ led him: "he emptied himself...he humbled himself..." The first speaks of sacrifice (what he renounced) and the second of

service, even slavery (how he identified himself with us and put himself at our disposal). We have tried to think what these two actions meant for him, and might mean for crosscultural witnesses.

We began with his renunciation. First, the renunciation of status. “Mild he laid his glory by,” we have been singing at Christmas. Because we cannot conceive what his eternal glory was like, it is impossible to grasp the greatness of his self-emptying. But certainly he surrendered the rights, privileges and powers which he enjoyed as God’s Son. “Status” and “status symbols” mean much in the modern world, but are incongruous in missionaries. We believe that wherever missionaries are they should not be in control or work alone, but always with—and preferably under—local Christians who can advise and even direct them. And whatever the missionaries’ responsibility may be, they should express attitudes “not of domination but of service” (Lausanne Covenant, para. 11).

A searching test of identification is how far we feel that we belong to the people, and still more—how far they feel that we belong to them.

Next the renunciation of independence. We have looked at Jesus— asking a Samaritan woman for water, living in other people’s homes and on other people’s money because he had none of his own, being lent a boat, a donkey, an upper room, and even being buried in a borrowed tomb. Similarly, cross-cultural messengers, especially during their first years of service, need to learn dependence on others.

Thirdly, the renunciation of immunity. Jesus exposed himself to temptation, sorrow, limitation, economic need and pain. So the missionary should expect to become vulnerable to new temptations, dangers and diseases, a strange climate, an unaccustomed loneliness and possibly death.

Turning from the theme of renunciation to that of identification, we have marvelled afresh at the completeness of our Saviour’s identification with us, particularly as this is taught in the Letter to the Hebrews. He shared our “flesh and blood,” was tempted as we are, learned obedience through his suffering and tasted death for us (Heb 2:14-18; 4:15; 5:8). During his public ministry Jesus befriended the poor and the powerless, healed the sick, fed the hungry, touched untouchables and risked his reputation by associating with those whom society rejected.

The extent to which we identify ourselves with the people to whom we go is a matter of controversy. Certainly it must include mastering their language, immersing ourselves in their culture, learning to think as they think, feel as they feel, do as they do. At the socio-economic level we do not believe

End of Reading: The Willowbank Report: Wanted:  
Humble Messengers of the Gospel!