

Monthly Missiological Reflection #18

"The Missionary as a Listener"

I have been surprised by the extraordinary response to the last Monthly Missiological Reflection (MMR) entitled [Transplanted and Contextualized Churches](#).

Responses from Asia, Africa, and South America

One Asian leader wrote that although he has been taught about Contextualization in seminary, almost all the churches he has visited in Indonesia, India, Philippines, Thailand, and Singapore are transplanted models of their original sending churches. Any attempt to apply contextualization within these churches is met with strong opposition from church leaders who uphold Western forms.

An African leader commented that the church as presented by the missionaries is merely a "cultural extension of American society." Americans evangelizing his country assume that their culture is superior and traditional African culture is something to be discarded. By superimposing their culture, they develop a kind of cultural hegemony. As a result, the churches they plant are mere "copycats of their home churches." "God help us," he writes, "to know that the Bible transcends culture, and each society must be allowed to be itself as it sees fit within the context of Scripture."

A missionary from South America describes how churches in his country were initially planted during two-week campaigns. The campaigners taught the new Christians not only the context of the message but also how to worship and organize the church. They assumed that the church, as a universal body, should have similar times and forms of worship resulting in the mission churches becoming mirror images of the missions-sending churches. Local leaders, converted within this system and supported by the sending churches, are content to conform. They have little motivation to adapt Christianity to fit the local culture. The church, as planted, is unable to minister to the existing culture but exists as a foreign culture enclave.

Two missions professors concurred with my opening illustration concerning of the lack of contextualization among the Three-Self churches, the official (and often regulated) churches in China. One believes that the Three-Self churches "have less to fear from government intervention" than "intransigent traditionalism."

These responses came not from reactionaries but from mission leaders who are sensitive to God's will and mission.

Few, if any, contemporary missionaries intend to superimpose their way of doing church upon new Christians. They would not ascribe to the colonial mentality that *civilizing* and *Christianizing* are dual purposes of missions. In fact, we frequently hear the statement, "Our purpose is to *Christianize*, not to *Westernize* (or *Americanize* or *Koreanize*)." *How, then, do the sending churches (and their missionaries) inadvertently create replicas of themselves in other lands?*

"Tell" Rather than "Discuss"

Missionaries generally are better at *telling* than *discussing*. Imagine beginning a church with a small group of believers who have little church heritage. Who will decide the basic patterns of this infant church? Will new Christians feel confident enough to make such decisions? The answer almost invariably is that missionaries, because of their Christian heritage, teach new believers

how to "do church" and these patterns reflect those of the missionaries' culture. The missionaries believe that they *must* take the role of *teacher* and feel that new Christians should be *learners*.

For example, when there is a death or an anticipated wedding in the new church, the Christians generally ask missionaries how Christians bury their dead or conduct marriage ceremonies. The new Christians know that these are highly religious rituals and consequently realize that traditional funeral and marriage rituals must be changed when they come into the kingdom of God. In all such cases to borrow is easier than to innovate. As a result, missionaries have typically passed on Western forms, which may or may not have religious significance in their own societies and advocated them as Christian. In regard to marriage, Western wedding ceremonies have been imported into many world contexts and called *Christian marriage*.

But missionaries should consider themselves as *learners* as well as *teachers*. Instead of *telling*, church-planting missionaries must learn how to meet with new Christians to study the Bible and decide mutually how to live out of a Christian "plausibility structure" (to use Newbigin's phrase for worldview) within their cultural context. A biblical worldview revealed in scripture should be the foundation of Christian discussion. This worldview, however, must answer the fundamental questions that local cultures are asking.

Rather than discussing biblical principles within cultural contexts and allowing the developing Christian community to make decisions, church founders too frequently provide Western answers to local questions.

Various participants bring their own strengths and limitations to the decision-making process. The missionaries have most likely studied the Bible for years and have become resources for biblical understanding. The new Christians have grown up in the culture and know traditional options to handle local problems. Working together they will teach each other biblical theology and cultural conceptions so that the community of faith can develop contextualized strategies. These strategies, then, become "the practical working out of the will of God within a cultural context" (Van Rheenen 1996, 140).

A missionary working among a very receptive but largely unreached group in Africa testifies that his policy is to leave a new church "on its own" with no national or expatriate evangelist present for their first Sunday meeting. New Christians, however, are given biblical principles about worship, church life and community, and care for the flock but are expected to work out these principles in culturally appropriate ways from the very beginning. *Thus local churches and local leaders are given freedom to work out God's eternal gospel in terms of local cultural understandings.*

After reading the last Monthly Missiological Reflection a thoughtful mission professor asked: "Is it not . . . naive to expect a young . . . church to be able to answer such questions without reference to the history of Christianity and the efforts of other cultures?" My response is three-fold. First, not all decisions need to be made immediately but over a process of time as local church leaders grow in the Lord. Second, missionaries should provide options of church life from church history and other contemporary cultures. But multiple options should be given and the missionaries should serve as resources and encouragers of the local leaders rather than decision-makers. Finally, missionaries who allow young Christians the freedom to contextualize the gospel will be amazed at their rapid growth in the Lord.

Case Study: Marriage Among the Kipsigis

During its initial years, the church among the Kipsigis of Kenya struggled with how Christians marry. According to African traditional religion, marriage was sealed through a ceremony called *katunisietab segutiet* ("the wedding of the grass band"). In this ceremony the bride and groom

stood before an elder of the village dressed in traditional robes made of cow skins. They bound each other's hands with a braided band made from crabgrass. The elder would invoke the blessings of the ancestors on the marriage by words of blessing and spitting of traditional beer. Would Christians follow such customs? The African Inland Church introduced *katunisieta* *peteit* ("the wedding of the ring"), a Western ceremony introduced into Kipsigis and called "Christian." Should Kipsigis Christians borrow Western customs and make them their own? The Church of Christ at various times practiced forms of both of the above marriage ceremonies, but after extensive dialogue and reflection, has introduced an innovated form called *katunisieta* *kayonet* ("the wedding of faith"). This form is both Christian and Kipsigis. Marriage is not based on any physical item, like a grass band or a ring, but on faith in sovereign God. The community is called together to witness a special union of people under God. This ceremony is so powerful that frequently I meet new Christians who testify that they first heard the gospel at a Christian wedding.

The creation of *katunisieta* *kayonet* did not occur in one day but in a process of dialogue and discussion over a long period of time. The first churches established desired that missionaries perform *katunisieta* *peteit* for all families desiring that their young people marry. We refrained and suggested, according to the missiological fad of the day, that old forms be taken and given new Christian meaning. We did not yet know the most significant strategic question, "How does God desire that we get married within this culture?" In any case a community of Christian leaders decided, with our urging, to take the traditional *segutiet* (the "grass band"), subtract the cow-skin apparel and ancestral rites, and substitute prayer in their place. To my surprise no one felt that this adapted wedding functioned to glorify God. Christians from the African Inland Church heritage considered the wedding "pagan" and the traditionalists felt that traditional items were both openly and inappropriately employed. Members of these young churches also concluded that they had made a mistake. They concluded that the rituals were too close to the traditional rite for their comfort and that it would even be better to follow the Western tradition of *katunisieta* *peteit*. For some time *katunisieta* *peteit* and *katunisieta* *segutiet* coexisted with the former practiced in more Westernized areas and the latter in more traditional areas.

I remember one particular elders' meeting about seven years into our work in Kipsigis. After all the topics of the day were concluded, several urgently suggested that we discuss how people of God get married. It was a joyous yet hilarious evening. It was a joy to see how a developing community of faith used scripture to determine the will of God. It was also a joy to see the extensive reflection that various maturing Christians had given to the topic. The evening was hilarious when a group of men began to spontaneously role-play various ways of getting married with some of the men assuming female roles. At the end of the meeting a new form of marriage developed that strives to be both faithful to God and communicative of God's will within the culture. The new ceremony was called *katunisieta* *kayonet* ("the wedding of faith") because marriage is a spiritual bond that cannot be illustrated by physical items that wither and corrode. It is rather a spiritual bond in which husband and wife are tied together in a loving relationship in Christ. With this form the Christian community presents a radically different kind of marriage in sharp contrast to traditional marriage. The essence of Christian marriage (love, holiness, relationship) defines the major difference between Christians and non-Christians.

In this situation innovated forms, developed by a community of faith through biblical and cultural reflection over an extended period of time, effectively brought meanings of Christianity into contemporary culture.

Conclusion

Missionaries should not only be master teachers of the word of God but also effective cultural listeners. Instead of making cultural decisions unilaterally because of their life experiences as Christians and training as missionaries, they should serve as partners within the body of Christ

and collaboratively work with the developing Christian community to develop church patterns that are both theologically responsible and culturally impactful.

To borrow is easier than to innovate. Missionaries must ask the significant question, "How does God desire that we 'marry our children' (or some other task) within this culture?" This question will lead them away from the naïve borrowing of Western customs to collaboratively and personally working with local Christian leaders to contextualize the gospel.

Sources Cited

Van Rheenen, Gailyn. 1996. *Missions: Biblical Foundations and Contemporary Strategies*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.