

Communicating Christ in the Intercultural Setting

1. Issues in **theology**: What does it mean to come to Christ? What is involved in "conversion"?
 - a. The NT data indicates that conversion is essentially a turning about--a turning of the direction of a person away from his/her way of life towards God through the person of Jesus Christ. The following selected passages show both the physical and spiritual use of the Greek term *epistrepho*:
 - i. Physical Turning

Matthew 9:22: Jesus **turned** and saw her. "Take heart, daughter," he said, "your faith has healed you." And the woman was healed from that moment.

Matthew 24:18: Let no one in the field **go back** to get his cloak.

Mark 8:33: But when Jesus **turned** and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. "Get behind me, Satan!" he said. "You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men."
 - ii. Spiritual Turning: Conversion

Matthew 13:15: For this people's heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them.'

Luke 1:16: Many of the people of Israel will he **bring back** to the Lord their God. 17 And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to **turn** the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous-- to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

Acts 3:19: Repent, then, and **turn** to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord,

Acts 11:21: The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and **turned** to the Lord.

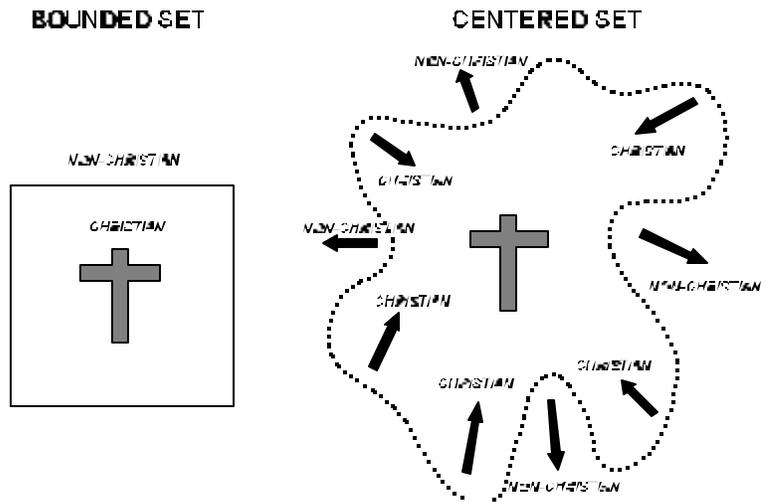
Acts 26:20: First to those in Damascus, then to those in Jerusalem and in all Judea, and to the Gentiles also, I preached that they should repent and turn to God and prove their repentance by their deeds.

Acts 28:27: For this people's heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and **turn**, and I would heal them.'

1 Thessalonians 1:9: for they themselves report what kind of reception you gave us. They tell how you **turned** to God from idols to serve the living and true God,

1 Peter 2:25: For you were like sheep going astray, but now you have **returned** to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.

b. In light of the biblical picture, should we use a bounded set or centered set approach to understanding conversion? Do we emphasize movement in the right direction or only the correct decision (adapted from Hovey, Before All Else Fails, p. 85)?



2. Issues in **making decisions**: conversion is less of a point and more of a process.

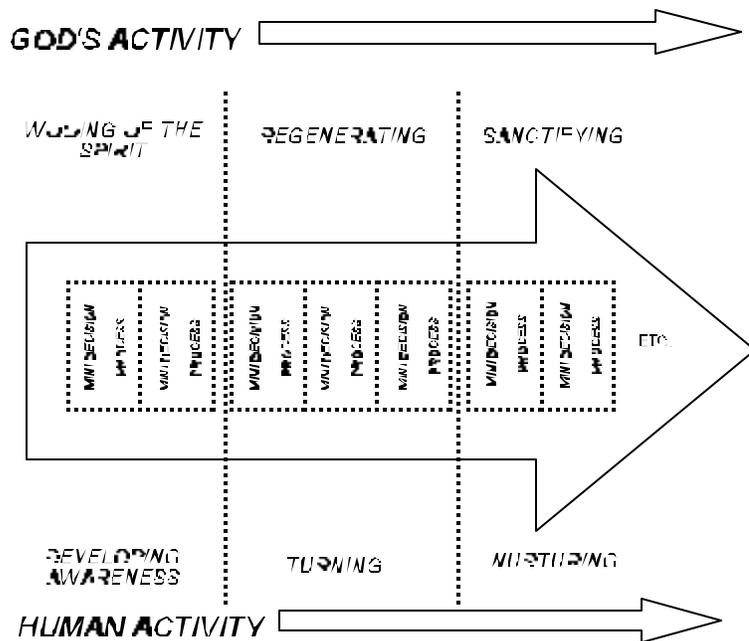
i. The Engel scale was the first broadly accepted scale that expanded the decision making process. Note the world view assumptions implicit in this diagram, including linear logic, cause and effect, rational decision making, and an individualistic approach to life

God's Role	Communicator's Role		Man's Response
General Revelation		-8	Awareness of Supreme Being but no Effective Knowledge of the gospel
Conviction	Proclamation	-7	Initial Awareness of the Gospel
		-6	Awareness of the Fundamentals of the Gospel
		-5	Grasp of Implications of Gospel
		-4	Positive Attitude Toward Gospel
		-3	Personal Problem Recognition
		-2	DECISION TO ACT
		-1	Repentance and Faith in Christ
	Persuasion +) Rejection)		
Regeneration			New Creature

ii. A more recent adaptation of this scale (based on Mark 4:1-20) has been proposed by Jim Peterson and K. C. Hinkley (Hinkley, Living Proof, p. 27):

PHASE	CULTIVATION					SOWING				HARVESTING			
Picture	The soil = human hearts					The seed = Gospel truth				The grain = Reproduced life of Jesus Christ			
Explanation	Speaks to the heart through relationship. Focus on caring.					Speaks to the mind through revelation. Focus on communication.				Speaks to the will for a faith response. Focus on conversion.			
Emphasis	The presence of the believer. Building a friendship bridge.					Presentation of the gospel. Giving understanding of truth.				Persuasion. Encouraging a meaningful decision of faith.			
Obstacles	Indifference Antagonism					Ignorance Error				Indecision Love of darkness			
Some Examples	Nicodemus (John 4) Woman at well (John 4)					Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8) Woman at well (John 4)				Philippian jailer (Acts 16) Woman at well (John 4)			
MINI-DECISIONS Some of the specific 'mini-decisions' that could be made in each phase.	-12	-11	-10	-9	-8	-7	-6	-5	-4	-3	-2	-1	☀
	Going his or her own way.	Aware of messenger	Has positive attitude toward messenger	Aware of difference in messenger	First aware of Bible's relevance to life.	Has positive attitude toward Bible	Aware of basics of the gospel	Understands meaning and implications	Has positive attitude toward gospel	Recognizes personal need	Decides to act	Repents and believes	New creature in Christ

iii. Kraft presented an early model of conversion as a process for consideration in the intercultural context. He leaves much more room as to what the actual decisions are and how they are to be made than the other two models (Kraft, Christianity in Culture, p. 338):



3. Issues from the perspective of **communication**: Ten myths about the communication of the Gospel (adapted from Kraft, Communication Theory, Ibid., pp. 35-54; note the critique in Hesselgrave and Rommen, Contextualization, pp. 193-196 and the notations given there)

Ten Myths about Communicating the Gospel

1. Hearing the Gospel with one's ears is equivalent to 'being reached' with the gospel.
2. The words of the Bible are so powerful that all people need to bring them to Christ is to be exposed to hearing/reading the Bible.
3. The Holy Spirit will make up for all mistakes if we are sincere, spiritual, and prayerful enough.
4. As Christians we should severely restrict our contacts with 'evil' people and refrain from going to 'evil' places lest we 'lose our testimony' and ruin our witness.
5. Preaching is God's only ordained means of communicating the gospel.
6. The sermon is the most effective vehicle for bringing about life change.
7. There is one best way to communicate the gospel.
8. The only key to effective communication is the precise formulation of the message.
9. Effective communication of the gospel is totally dependent on the communicator.
10. All people really need is more information.

4. Issues related to the **message that we bring**

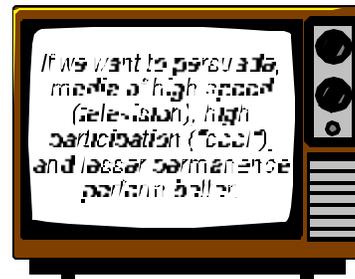
- a. We seek to present a unique message. Several presuppositional items should be noted:
 - i. Because people are made in God's image, they are able to understand the Gospel message. By this I do not mean that they can read Greek, or that they understand the NT categories of thought. Rather, I mean that the message of the Gospel, when couched in appropriate cultural form and idiom, is at its most basic level theoretically understandable to any person in any culture. Mayers, working within a similar framework, postulates the following as a communication principle, "*The truth of God must come to each man completely and effectively in keeping with what he is socioculturally*" (Mayers, Christianity Confronts Culture, rev. ed., p. 116)
 - ii. At the same time, our sin has clouded our reasoning process, and Satan uses it to blind our minds to the Gospel message.
 - iii. However, the Spirit is the One who ultimately makes God's message understandable and generates a response within us. We must never lose sight

of this!

- b. Is there a "core" message of salvation? We must be careful with this, and avoid the problems that come with proposing a "canon within the canon" of the full scope of biblical revelation. With that warning in mind, the following is a suggested content for the evangelistic message of good news (from Arthur Johnston, "Theology of Evangelism", pp. 8-9):
 - i. The fact of sin (Rom. 3:23)
 - ii. The penalty of sin (Rom. 6:23)
 - iii. The penalty must be paid (Heb. 9:27)
 - iv. The penalty was paid by Christ (Rom. 5:8)
 - v. Salvation is a free gift (Eph. 2:8, 9)
 - vi. It must be received (John 1:12)
 - vii. Now is the time to receive it [or Him] (2 Cor. 6:2, Rev. 3:20).

5. Issues related to the **medium (or media) through which we communicate**. The following are reminders from the media lecture:

- a. Different media are better at different functions (as determined by tests in Western culture):



- b. There is not a single BEST medium for all situations; a combination of media is often the best approach. In determining this, there is a need to match the media chosen with the target audience.

6. Issues related to the **communication event**

- a. We need the appropriate level of basic social skills in the new cultural setting so as to not offend unnecessarily.
- b. The levels of bonding and trust between messenger and audience are important factors

to take into account

- c. If we do not have the ability to "filter" cultural responses, then we may not ever know what the genuineness of the response (especially important in high context cultures).
7. Issues related to the possible **responses** to the Gospel. Hesselgrave (Cross-Cultural Communication, pp. 106-115) points out several possibilities of response to the Gospel in cross-cultural contexts:
- a. **Sincere acceptance**
 - b. **Overt rejection**
 - c. **Situational reformulation** (involves interpreting the new message in terms of previous experience and then incorporating it within that framework--usually this is not thought of as a deliberate process, but an "innocent" one based on an incomplete message)
 - d. **Syncretistic incorporation** (often seen as a more deliberate attempt to retain the old and incorporate the new within it, keeping the old in the position of greater importance)
 - e. **Studied protraction** (waiting to make any decisions until all necessary information is gathered. It is not an outright rejection, but it is certainly not an acceptance)
 - f. **Symbiotic resignation** (decision on the part of the source that the new message is not for him, but that others within his framework are free to make it if they so choose. He lets those who make it live in symbiosis [two dissimilar organisms living together] with him. [A "You do what you want, I will do what I want" type of decision.])

We may also note:

- g. **Overt acceptance but covert rejection** (the relational "yes"; when a decision is indicated not because of genuine acceptance of Christ but because of the communication dynamics present when the message is given; often the "yes" will be because of either
 - i. relational expectations *or*
 - ii. lack of genuine understanding of what is being asked)
8. Issues related to **spiritual warfare** and communicating Christ
- a. All people are made in God's image.
 - i. This is the foundation of who we are as people, and permeates every aspect of our existence. It also drives us to find religious significance in life. If Wink is correct in stating that our images of God create us (Wink, 1992, 48), then this color is at the very core of who we are and provides the driving direction for world view.

- ii. Being in the image of Someone, we have a built in desire to link with the One whose image we bear. As a result of Adam and Eve's fall and their consequent expulsion from the Garden (Gen. 3:1-24), our direct link was sundered. However, we retained the image of God (Gen. 9:6), and our search for intimate re-connection with the Creator continues, though it is now distorted and is expressed as a deep concern with the powers that govern the world we inhabit (Jacobs, 1979, Conn, 1979; see also Wink, 1992, 3-10).
 - iii. Without going into a full discussion on the image, the main point to be made here is that we are creatures who are given the freedom to choose (even the highest satanic priest can come to Christ). Additionally, being in God's image, we provoke jealousy in Satan.
 - iv. Those without Christ, though sharing the image of God, are dead in their sins, and essentially powerless against Satan's overall control of their lives though they can choose to say no to individual sins
 - v. Most importantly, being in God's image, we have a purpose for our existence, which is **to be connected to that which we image**. This is the essence of **glorifying** God: we connect ourselves to Him by ascribing to Him that which is rightfully His and honoring Him by joyfully and gratefully living according to the order that He established in His creative act.
- b. Ultimately, all conversions are kingdom changes (as a result of kingdom conflicts; Col. 1:13). This must undergird our orientation to the whole study of communicating Christ in the intercultural setting!
- c. Satan holds unbelievers in slavery:
- John 12:40: "He has blinded their eyes and deadened their hearts, so they can neither see with their eyes, nor understand with their hearts, nor turn--and I would heal them."
- 2 Corinthians 3:14: But their **minds** were made dull, for to this day the same veil remains when the old covenant is read. It has not been removed, because only in Christ is it taken away.
- 2 Corinthians 4:3-4: And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing.⁴ The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.
- Galatians 4:3: So also, when we were children, we were in slavery under the basic principles of the world.
- Ephesians 2:1-3: As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, ² in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. ³ All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath.
- ¹ John 5:19 We know that we are children of God, and that the whole world is under the control of the evil one.
- d. Issue: God's role and our role (adapted from Carson, Divine Sovereignty, pp. 206-222)
- i. The fact of the tension: In trying the interrelate the infinite God with the finite

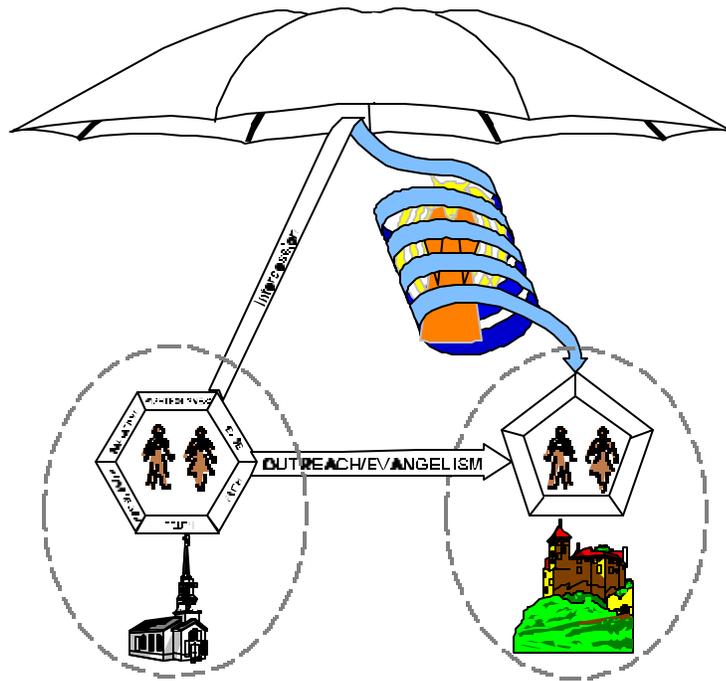
human beings we will of necessity face tensions. Scripture presents two facts that we find difficult to reconcile:

- (1) God is sovereignly in control of the universe (and, as an infinite being, His control can be infinite).
- (2) We are fully responsible before God for all of our actions.

ii. Some of the areas in which this tension manifests itself are:

- (1) How "free" is our "free" will? Are there boundaries to our will, and, if so, how far do they extend? For example, can we in any way thwart God's plan?
- (2) How does God "outside of time" relate to a people bounded by time? Is God's foreknowledge based on Him "seeing" the future or "determining" it? Does God "force" our free choice, or merely see that we will "freely" make it?
- (3) How is evil to be explained? Does God "use" secondary causes (e.g., Satan), and does this absolve Him of "responsibility" for evil, since even these secondary causes can only do His will?
- (4) Is there more than one "will" of God? For example, God "desires" that no one should perish, yet some do. Does 2 Pet. 3:9 express His "will" or His "want"?
- (5) How can God be a transcendent being (one who is above space and time, one who has all authority, and who is thus necessarily unknowable to us in the ultimate sense) and yet still a personal one who desires to interact with people? Is it possible for us to talk meaningfully about a transcendent being?
- (6) Can we lose our salvation? If we focus on God's sovereignty, the answer is no. If we focus on our responsibility, the answer may be yes. How can we resolve this?

- e. Evangelism involves the intersection of five sets of influences: God, Satan, the domination system of our cultures, the witness of the evangelist, and the personal desires and choices of the non-regenerate person who bears God's image):



Keeping it in perspective:

- i. The sociological/anthropological dynamic is understanding the minds of those in cultures other than our own. We seek to understand them so as to communicate in terms that they can grasp.
- ii. The theological dynamic is enabling the spiritual resources we have as Christians to be brought to bear on engaging in the kingdom conflict to which we are called.
- iii. Undergirding all of this is prayer, the ultimate "key" to successful evangelism in any context!

