

Culture and Cross-cultural Relationships

“Culture” is understood in many different ways. In practice, a person or a society’s culture has to do with “values” (i.e. what is regarded as having highest value and significance in their group), with “taboos” (i.e. what is unacceptable behaviour in their group) and with “customs” (i.e. what have become treasured “traditions” within the group).

Some aspects of a society or group’s culture are “amoral”, i.e. they do not have any ethical or moral implications. However, since sin has tainted or polluted all parts of man’s life and experience including his life in community and all cultural expressions of that life, there is the inevitable clash between some aspects of each culture and the Gospel and truth of our Lord Jesus Christ.

In this particular discussion, we will limit our focus to the former category -- those parts of every culture that cannot be said to be intrinsically opposed to God’s truth. These aspects give to any society their particular identity and sense of belonging. The members of each society find acceptance among their people by adhering to the group’s accepted cultural norms (spoken or unspoken).

Within many nations, there are more than one “culture”. For example, there will be a “youth culture” as opposed to the culture of the older generation. Personality, temperament, social standing and family upbringing are only several aspects that will give rise to these variations. To add to these today we find the exposure to “foreign” cultures through the media of the radio, television and films.

Thus it is not helpful when we think about the citizens of one particular nation as all having an almost identical culture. This way of thinking is often called “stereo-typing” and it is harmful because it gives rise to the forming of prejudices towards them.

Whereas God has called us to love, accept and respect one another. We cannot carry out God’s Word as long as we keep holding on to our pet stereo-types of other cultures. Rather God calls us to love and accept them as they are -- as people who have been raised in their particular culture. Our part is NOT to ask or expect them to change -- to wear our own cultural “filters” and see the world through our eyes. We are the ones who must do the changing and adjusting.

Learning to obey our Lord’s command to love brethren -- both within our multi-cultural teams as well as within national churches -- is a PROCESS in which we work together with the Holy Spirit.

The steps in this process include:

- ◆ putting on an open and humble attitude towards other peoples and their cultures,
- ◆ observing their ways,
- ◆ asking them caring and insightful questions to gain a better insight into their culture,
- ◆ accepting their cultural values, taboos and customs as equally valid with ours, and then
- ◆ adjusting and accommodating our ways of relating with them thus promoting loving harmony and unity.

Obviously this process does not take place in a day or two or happen without a real inner battle. But as we are called to worship and serve the Lord with peoples from many different backgrounds and cultures, it is “work” that we cannot avoid or put off.

For what should we keep our eyes open as we observe the behaviour of others? In other words, what are the various parts or aspects of a people’s values, taboos and customs that we need to look for that will give us those necessary “clues” that will help us understand, appreciate and love them?

The values, taboos and customs of a people are most clearly manifest in a wide range of observable attitudes. The following are some of the major attitudes that lie behind a people’s cultural norms and values:

Attitudes towards relationships in general:

- independent versus community life-style
- broad (many relationships) versus deep (fewer relationships)
- open & honest versus careful not to lose face
- open displays of affection versus generally reserved
- outgoing & friendly to all versus private and outwardly unfriendly (towards outsiders)
- short-term relationships versus expectation of enduring, longterm relationships
- direct, blunt versus indirect and cautious careful lest others may be offended
- openly affirming versus putting people down
- value privacy versus value relationships and company
- loud and energetic versus quiet and unassuming

Attitudes towards societal relationships:

- egalitarian (all are equal) versus conscious of perceived rank in society

relate easily with all on an equal footing versus follow carefully established patterns of relating to others according to their position as “higher” or “lower”

Attitudes towards authority figures:

strong awareness of need to obey and submit versus open attitude tending towards rejection of authority figures if their performance is unacceptable

value initiative versus value following and obeying a leader’s orders

relate on a first name basis versus address with respect using titles

Attitudes towards family relationships:

close family ties versus independent attitudes

value intimate family relationships versus value work and personal goals

high respect for parents versus treat parents casually

value highly family celebrations and events versus treat family events and celebrations casually

Attitudes towards identity as a people:

seeing themselves as being “unique” among all peoples, eg descendants of the gods

superior thoughts versus negative and inferior thoughts

very proud of nation’s history versus ashamed of nation’s history

mono-cultural environment versus multicultural environment

strong national spirit (proud of national heritage and customs) versus without any enthusiasm and national spirit, indifferent and apathetic

Attitudes towards work:

work-oriented versus leisure-oriented

time conscious versus value relationships

serious, perfectionistic versus casual, easy-going and uncommitted

Attitudes towards education:

value education for the masses versus education for the elite

value a person’s work and performance above higher education versus value educational institutions and degrees which raise one’s social standing

Attitudes towards property, money and “things”:

value the impression given to others and the outward appearance of things in the eyes of others versus the “real” value of property

value relationships and people versus material wealth and “things”

free to give away and loan personal property versus “my property, my possessions”

spend money on needs of family and children versus spend money mainly on personal needs and desires

Attitudes towards laws and “taboos”:

value individual freedom versus the keeping of rules and laws

sense little obligation to follow rules in society versus motivated by a strong, inner sense of obligation to abide by society’s laws

little awareness of how one’s behaviour may affect others versus very conscious of the need to do what others around us expect of us

Attitudes towards intimate subjects/topics:

open and bold in talking about body parts and bodily functions versus treating talk about any such issues as “taboo”

little or no problem with nudity (i.e. within groups of the same sex) versus very self-conscious and inhibited

open and frank discussion concerning normal sexual relationships versus guarded discussion about such subjects using euphemisms

Attitudes towards death and dying:

open for all including children versus closed and reserved for adults only

open and frank discussions versus talk only in softly spoken language

for the family only versus a community affair

Without doubt, there are many other “windows” through which we can take a look at a person or a society’s culture. Such as how they value hospitality or their sense of indebtedness to others for gifts given, or their ways of giving and receiving of gifts.

Whatever we can do to help ourselves come to understand a brother or a sister in Christ will not only bring us closer to them in fellowship and ministry but will also give a needed example to others about the immense importance of valuing others for who they are -- and this includes learning to value the rich diversity of their cultural values and traditions.

It may be hard work, but it’s also work that God has given us to do. And it’s work that brings forth much fruit to the praise and glory of God as we show the world how people from different cultural backgrounds

instead of growing further and further apart can in truth grow closer and closer together as they live in community.

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