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Principles and Concepts for International Teaching Ministry

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Introduction

Opportunities for this writer to teach a seminar or course on the Victorious Christian Life (especially related to Romans 6-8) in various countries appear to be growing. The writer would like to integrate principles and concepts of Intercultural Studies to enhance and improve his teaching overseas in the many different cultural contexts. The experience described here would help others also to redesign their ministry goals and actual conduct of teaching.

Communication Theory & Processes

Even though this speaker's culture provides him with communication processes and a system of knowledge that allow him to know how to communicate with others and how to interpret others' behavior, there are still many challenges to face in the communication process. How can an international speaker relate a message of holiness in an effective way to Christians in Africa, Asia and Latin America where the culture is different from his own?

A. The Influence of Language

Language is a product of culture, and culture is a product of language. The language one speaks influences what he or she sees and thinks, and what she sees and thinks, in part, influences her culture. Besides that, non-verbal encoding of messages, like language, also varies from culture to culture. Language is mostly a conscious activity, while nonverbal behavior, such as gestures, facial expressions or tones of voice, is mostly an unconscious action.

B. Three Cultures

Culture is “a pattern of learned, group-related perception—including both verbal and nonverbal language, attitudes, values, belief systems, disbelief systems, and behaviors-- that is accepted and expected by an identity group” (Singer 1987:34).

At least three cultures (representing the Source, the Receptor and the Messenger) present a complex cultural matrix that must be untangled for the Scriptural message to be effectively communicated.

Receptors decode the message, not on the basis of what the source intends, but rather with respect to their own context and experience. The speaker, therefore, must be concerned with “reality” from the people’s perspective and the meanings, both explicit

and implicit, they attach to it. Preconceived notions about the nature of communication and about other cultures will hinder effective interaction.

Interacting with people from other cultures can cause uncertainty since the speaker can’t predict how others will react to the message. Such interaction can also cause anxiety since it is possible that people will not accept him and/or the message.

C. Initial Interactions

When this speaker arrives to give a seminar in new context there usually is not much time to become acquainted with the audience and their culture. He is an outsider and must seek to relate to people and their needs. He must arrive as a learner, approaching the conference or class with a desire to learn and not judge; he must also seek to accept their view of reality and discover what it means to live by those standards.

Since relationships are more convincing than facts in most non-industrial cultures, it is important to seek to establish good rapport and gain trust as quickly as possible. People who feel forced into a foreign model of communication, which by inference places the Scriptures into an “outside” category, will adversely affect receptivity. So the bottom line is to interact with others to the extent possible, maintain an attitude of love and concern, and allow the Holy Spirit to speak through the message.

Discovering and using local forms of communication can also be important to the understanding and acceptance of the gospel message. How do the people use music, dance and drama? What are their oral styles of communication—poetry, epic tale, proverb, chant, exhortation or animated discussion? How can the message of the cross be presented effectively in these forms?

In his initial interaction with attendees of a conference or with students, the speaker, who is from a white, middle-class subculture in the U.S., would normally attempt to obtain information about the participants’ attitudes, feelings and beliefs in order to reduce uncertainty.

In Japan, however, such questions could possibly be perceived as rude or nose if a participant did not know that he was the speaker. Japanese seek to know others’ status and background in order to reduce uncertainty and to know which version of the language to use since there are different ways to speak to people who are superiors, equals, and inferiors. This would lead a Japanese to introduce him or herself and ask questions that

are designed to gather the information necessary for him or her to communicate with the speaker.

One way to side-step possible problems is for the speaker to question beforehand someone he knows who has lived in the particular country and/or to read a book on the culture that would give him needed information about the audience's cultural background.

D. Collectivistic and Individualistic Cultures

1. Intuitive and Analytical Thinking Patterns

Compared to those of individualistic cultures, the thinking patterns used in collectivistic cultures are often characterized as relational, integrative, holistic and intuitive. Asians, for example, are not concerned as much with logic and analysis as they are with intuitive knowing and meditative introspection and contemplation. They engage less in analyzing a topic divisively by breaking it down into smaller units as North Americans often do.

What seems to be of central importance in Asian thinking is certain repose of the personality in which it feels it is grasping the inner significance of the object of contemplation. The direct sense of rapport with a person, idea or thing is the primary end result of Asian thinking. This the speaker must take into account when speaking in Asia.

The intuitive thinking of collectivists tends to de-emphasize the power of analysis, classification, precision and abstraction, and the result is perhaps not as effective in attaining accurate facts about the object.

But intuitive thinking does allow holistic and intimate identification with all the contextual cues in a communication transaction, thus making the perceptual patterns of collectivists highly contextual. The intuitive style of thinking provides a powerful cognitive mechanism for developing a harmonious rapport with the other person and the environment. This mechanism enables collectivists to be sensitive to the most subtle undercurrents of emotion and mood in a particular communication event and interpersonal relationship without having to engage in a deliberate attempt to logically analyze the situation.

A few decades ago the writer would basically concentrate on logic and step-by-step, chain-like organization; he depended upon facts, figures and quotations to support his arguments. Yet, this would not gel well, for example in a Japanese context which does not have such a sense of rigidity but rather is like a leisurely throwing a ball back and forth and carefully observing each other's responses. The Japanese use more subjective and ambiguous forms for support.

2. Personal and Group Opinions

There is always the danger of seeing one's own behavior as normal and appropriate (egocentric bias). One simple example would be a member of a collectivistic culture who identifies with the group and offers personal opinions by using the pronoun "we" when stating his or her own personal opinion. Someone from an individualistic culture could very well perceive such a statement as an opinion of the whole class. Such a misinterpretation would result in misunderstanding if the cultural differences in the use of personal pronouns are ignored. Since one's life experiences differ from other people, his or her interpretations of their behavior may also be incorrect. This too leads to misunderstandings.

E. High and Low Context Cultures

In a classroom setting members of high-context cultures generally tend to be concerned more with the overall emotional quality of the interaction than with the meaning of particular words or sentences. Courtesy often takes precedence over truthfulness, which is consistent with the cultural emphasis on maintaining social harmony as the primary function of speech. This leads members of high-context cultures to give an agreeable and pleasant answer to a question when a literal, factual one might be unpleasant or embarrassing.

Most noteworthy in their communicative style, North Americans tend to use explicit words and prefer to use words like "absolutely," "certainly," and "positively." By contrast, for example, the cultural assumptions of interdependence and harmony require that Japanese speakers limit themselves to implicit and even ambiguous use of words. In order to avoid leaving an assertive impression, they are more likely to depend upon words such as "maybe," "perhaps," "probably," and "somewhat."

Asians can be suspicious of the genuineness of direct verbal expressions of love and respect. Excessive verbal praise or compliments sometimes are received with feelings of embarrassment.

Wherever the writer is teaching, he must, therefore, develop the type of relationship with the audience that will most benefit communication. Cultural relevance (not cultural relativism) applies cultural understanding to the effective communication of God's truth.

II. Cultural Influences on the Communication Process and Challenges for Effective Communication

There are challenges to be faced in order to have effective communication when speaking to students or participants of conferences in different cultural contexts. These challenges stem from intercultural interactions and well as from other issues that will be set forth in this section.

A. High and Low Context Cultures

Understanding the form of communication that predominates in a culture is critical to correctly interpreting and predicting the behavior of people from that culture. The U.S. falls toward the low-context end of the communication continuum where the mass of information is vested in a specific code; most members of such low-context, individualistic cultures tend to communicate in a direct fashion.

Most Asian cultures, however, such as the Japanese, Chinese and Korean, fall toward the high-context continuum where the majority of the information is either in the physical context or it's internalized in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message; members of these high-context, collectivistic cultures tend to communicate in an indirect fashion.

When discussing something they have on their minds, high-context individuals (such as in the Amhara culture in Ethiopia) will expect the participant in the discussion to know what's bothering them, and therefore, won't be specific. The result is that the person will talk around and around a point, in effect putting all the pieces in place except the crucial one. Placing it properly is the role of his or her interlocutor.

A teacher would need to be careful in a high context environment since a class may state that they understand the lesson when they really don't. Out of respect for the teacher and not wanting to admit failure to understand, the student may simply nod his head in agreement with what is being said, which may or may not indicate understanding. To check whether he is being understood the teacher could ask for restatement or what the new information means to the students.

If the writer (high context person) tries to build a friendship with a low context person, the teacher might err in creating too structured an environment for the other person to feel relaxed and comfortable. Formal settings will communicate to a low context person that the relationship is based on roles or etiquette rather than on the personal desire to be friends, and it will be harder for the person to be him or herself.

B. High and Low Uncertainty Avoidance Cultures

1. Clarity and Ambiguity

In a classroom setting, students from a high or strong uncertainty avoidance country/culture (e.g., Belgium, Japan, France, Mexico, Brazil) will prefer clear instructions; they will avoid conflict and disapprove of competition between other students more than those in low or weak uncertainty avoidance cultures (e.g., Singapore, Malaysia, India, Philippines, USA, Indonesia).

Since teachers and students in high uncertainty avoidance cultures try to avoid ambiguity, they will develop rules and rituals for virtually every possible situation in which they might find themselves.

Most Germans (a strong avoidance country), therefore, favor structured learning situations with precise learning objectives, detailed assignments and strict timetables. They like situations in which there is one correct answer which they can find. They expect to be rewarded for accuracy.

Most British participants, on the other hand, despise too much structure. They like open-ended learning situations with vague objectives, broad assignments, and no timetables at all. The suggestion that there could be only one correct answer is taboo with them. They expect to be rewarded for originality. The British reactions are typical for countries with low uncertainty avoidance. Suffice to say that this North American speaker needs to be aware these challenges.

2. Student-Teacher Roles

Students from strong uncertainty avoidance countries expect their teachers to be the experts who have all the answers. Teachers who use cryptic academic language are respected. As a rule, students will not confess to intellectual disagreement with their teachers. Yet, students from low uncertainty avoidance countries accept a teacher who says, "I don't know." Their respect goes to teachers who use plain language, and to books which explain difficult issues in ordinary terms. Intellectual disagreement in academic matters in these societies can be seen as a stimulating exercise.

The degree of formality or informality of role expectations between student and teacher may, therefore, cause misunderstanding when a teacher tries to communicate with a student. For example, a professor who allows himself or herself to be treated without the utmost respect or one who confesses ignorance on a subject is generally not taken seriously by Iranian, Turkish or Egyptian students since such students and professors expect a high degree of formality in the relationship. Such students would probably lose respect for a North American teacher who is too friendly and common with them.

Asian and African cultures have a high degree of hierarchy present in the relationship. In Asian universities, for example, students are expected to take notes on what the professor says and not ask challenging questions. A North American student or professor would not understand this expectation if she carried over her expectations of the student-teacher role relationship from the U.S. or Canada. If the Asian professor avoids answering the questions or tells a Canadian student to look up the answers for herself, the student may perceive the professor as unhelpful or lacking knowledge in his field. The professor, on the other hand, might see the student as a troublemaker because she is not engaging in proper conduct for the role of a student.

3. Relating to Strangers

Asians tend to avoid contact with people they do not know since the stranger's behavior is not predictable. Strangers from North America, however, have a different approach to people who are unknown and unfamiliar: they don't avoid them, and they will approach them and try to get to know them.

One can see that applying this rule in Asia might lead only to frustration.

In fact, since North Americans are strangers, Asians would tend to see them as nonpersons, and the rules of etiquette would not apply to interactions with them.

These different rules would lead each party to make faulty attributions about the other's behavior. The strangers, in all likelihood, would see the Asians as standoffish and impolite, while the Asians might see the strangers as overly aggressive and impolite. Only by becoming aware of each other's expectations can there be correct interpretation, accurate attributions about each other's behavior, and effective communication.

4. Confrontation

Probably due to their doing orientation and the use of linear logic, individualistic, low-context cultures (e.g., U.S.) are more likely to possess a confrontational, direct attitude toward conflicts. Students in collectivistic, high-context cultures (e.g., Mexico), however, are more likely to have a non-confrontational, indirect attitude toward conflicts since they have a strong desire for group harmony and tend to use indirect forms of communication, which allow all parties to preserve honor or "face."

Physical space in social relations also differs in various cultures. Arabs, for example, are often nose-to-nose, touching one another and breathing into each another's faces when they communicate; to the Arab, good smells are considered pleasing and a way of being involved with each other. People in Latin America often cannot talk comfortably with each other unless they are very close together, which, at a distance, might evoke either sexual or hostile feeling in North America.

C. High and Low Power Distance Cultures

In large or high power distance cultures (e.g., Indonesia, India, West Africa, Singapore and Brazil) the parent-child inequality carries over to teacher-student inequality.

Teachers are treated with respect and students may even have to stand up when a teacher enters. The educational process is teacher-centered and the teacher initiates all communication. Students expect to be told what to do and to speak up only when invited

to; professors are never publicly contradicted and so students will not question their orders. At universities, what is transferred is not seen as an impersonal “truth,” but rather the personal wisdom of the teacher. In such a system the quality of one’s learning is virtually exclusively dependent on the excellence of one’s teachers.

If the North American speaker does not understand such a power distance system, misunderstanding is likely, unless the speaker, or the students or both understand each other’s power distance culture. If the speaker tries to minimize the inequality between teacher and student, attempting to get students to treat him as just an equal and/or he expects the students to take all the initiatives in class, the speaker will have difficulties in teaching in places like Malaysia, Mexico, Indonesia, India, Singapore and West & East Africa.

One way to have class participation would be to have students discuss a question in a group and have them decide who will give their joint answer to the class.

In small or low power distance cultures (e.g., Japan, U.S., Netherlands and New Zealand) teachers are supposed to treat the students as basic equals and teachers expect their students to treat them the same way. Younger teachers appear more equal and so are usually more liked than older ones. The educational process is student-centered, with a premium on student initiative. The students are to ask questions and it is understood that students will openly disagree with the teacher. “Truths” or “facts” are transferred to students. Effective learning in this system depends on whether the communication between student and teacher is truly established. The entire system is based on the students’ well-developed need for independence; the quality of learning is to a considerable extent determined by the excellence of the students.

The above descriptions of large and small power distance situations are extremes, and most home, school and work situations will be in between and contain some elements of both.

D. Collectivist and Individualist Cultures

In a collectivist classroom the virtues of harmony and the maintenance of “face” reign supreme. Confrontations and conflicts are to be avoided, or at least formulated so as not to hurt anyone; even students should not lose face if this can be avoided. Shaming, that is, invoking the group’s honor, is an effective way to correct offenders: they will be put in order by their ingroup members. In such cultures, the teacher is in effect dealing with the student as part of an ingroup and not as an isolated individual.

In the individualist classroom, however, students expect to be treated as individuals and impartially, regardless of their background. Confrontation and open discussion of conflicts is often considered salutary, and face-consciousness is weak or nonexistent.

The purpose of education is to know how to learn; the assumption is that learning never ends.

In the collectivist society there is a stress on adaptation to the skills and on the virtues necessary to be an acceptable group member, and the culture places a premium on tradition. Learning is often seen more as a one-time process, reserved just for the young, who have to learn how to do things in order to participate in society.

In the individualist society a diploma not only improves the holder's economic worth but also his or her self-respect: it provides a sense of achievement. In the collectivist society a diploma is thought of as an honor to the holder and to his or her ingroup; this entitles the holder to associate with members of higher-status groups. The social acceptance that comes with the diploma is considered more important than the individual self-respect that comes with mastering a subject.

E. Feminine and Masculine Cultures

In the more feminine cultures, like the Netherlands, Thailand, East & West Africa and Indonesia, the average student is considered the norm. In more masculine countries, however, like Japan, Philippines, the U.S. & Australia the best students are the norm. Parents in masculine countries expect their children to try to match the best. The "best boy in class" in the Netherlands is a somewhat ridiculous figure.

The above difference is noticeable in classroom behavior. In masculine cultures students try to make themselves visible in class and compete openly with each other (unless collectivist norms put a limit to this). In feminine cultures they do not want to appear too eager; mutual solidarity, although not always practiced, is seen as a goal. Failing in school is a disaster in a masculine culture whereas it is only a minor incident in a feminine one.

Teachers' brilliance and academic reputation and students' academic performance are the dominant factors in masculine countries. On the feminine side teachers' friendliness and social skills and students' social adaptation play a bigger role.

F. East and West

1. Defining Truth

Both the Indian and the Chinese minds seem to take a position different from the Western one when it comes to the need for defining truth. No major Eastern religion is based on the assumption that there is a truth as such which a human community can embrace. They offer, instead, various ways in which a person can improve him/herself; however, these do not consist in believing, but rather in ritual, meditation or ways of living. Some

of these ways may lead to a “higher spiritual state,” and eventually to “unification with god or gods.” What one does is what is important.

The Western concern with truth is supported by an axiom in Western logic that a statement excludes its opposite: if A is true, B, which is the opposite of A, must be false. Eastern logic does not have such an axiom. If A is true, its opposite B may also be true, and together they produce a wisdom which is superior to A or B. Western thinking is analytical, while Eastern thinking is synthetic. People in East and South-East Asian countries can, therefore, quite easily adopt elements from different religions, or adhere to more than one religion at the same time. What is true or who is right is less important than what works and how the efforts of individuals with different thinking patterns can be coordinated towards a common goal.

2. Time

Some cultures see time from a history of interactions and events. Remembering and sharing pleasant and personal, significant life events in a Nigerian conference, for example, the teacher can create an opening to be heard and to be a legitimate participant.

In a different example, just because meetings may not start on the speaker’s timetable, it does not mean that Kenyans, for instance, are running late, being irresponsible, disrespectful or do not care about an event. If the teacher does not understand this and acts unwisely, Kenyans could think that the speaker is being unfeeling, rigid or without Christian priorities.

Since understanding other cultures’ “clocks” will promote better relationships, it is important to be honest, explain why a time table is important in a particular meeting, and recognize that the speaker’s (culture’s) way of telling time is different than theirs but that does not mean that either culture is better.

III. Communicative Intercultural Competence

Though discussed in the previous two units, this section will seek to answer the question of how communicative intercultural competence should look with regards to teaching in various countries/cultures of the world. Comments will also be made as to how to improve or enhance the speaker’s teaching ministry by applying the concepts learned in the course.

A. Cultural Programming

It is culture that “programs” the individual to define what is real, what is true, what is right, what is beautiful and what is good. Yet people generally remain largely unconscious of the cultural imprinting that governs their personality and behavior.

Human beings automatically treat what is most characteristically their own as though it were innate. They are programmed to think, feel and behave as though anyone whose behavior is either not predictable or is peculiar in any way is strange, improper, irresponsible, or inferior.

In this sense, all people have a natural tendency to be ethnocentric as a result of their very inseparable relationship with their culture.

In some cultures, knowledge is considered as open and shared. Students learn ideas but don't necessarily learn (nor are they expected to learn) the names of people who developed the ideas. Likewise, in their term papers, students quote liberally from the work of others. In American universities, however, such quotations without citation are considered plagiarism, the accusation of which can lead to severe and embarrassing disciplinary action. This situation represents a good example of a practice that is natural and unquestioned in one culture but which is severely criticized in another. (Althen, ed. 1981:131).

B. Three Cognitive Processes

Effective communicators make a distinction between three interrelated cognitive processes—description, interpretation, and evaluation. Description is the actual report of what is observed with the minimum of distortion and without attributing any social significance to the behavior.

Interpretation is what is thought about concerning what is seen and heard; multiple interpretations can be made for any particular description of behavior. Evaluations are positive or negative judgments concerning the social significance attributed to behavior.

For example, in Japan it is expected that teachers will dress appropriately for their position, and in addition, it is unacceptable for a teacher to sit on a desk. One can imagine the various interpretations and evaluations that could be made if a professor, while teaching, sat on a desk in Japan in faded jeans.

C. Seeking to Avoid Misunderstandings

If there is a high potential for misunderstanding in the classroom, this speaker needs to be mindful and consciously aware of the process of communication that is taking place.

He can seek clarification of meanings when he realizes that misunderstanding has occurred. He can also ask someone to repeat what was said when he do not understand. He can request feedback about how the students are interpreting a teaching. He can seek to understand how others are feeling; he can be interested in what they have to say, be sensitive to the needs of the students, and seek to understand their points of view.

He can adapt his nonverbal behavior (e.g., the distance he stands from the class in the front of the classroom, the amount of eye contact he should have). He must seek to not insist on using his own rules of communication, because if he does, there will, in all likelihood, be misunderstandings when he communicates with students or participants in conferences who he does not know.

Hopefully through an understanding of Inter-cultural communication, and through the writer's varied experience in many different cultures, he will continue to become less ethnocentric and more understanding of the fundamental oneness of all human beings, less rigid and more open, better able to accept and appreciate cultural variations, and whenever possible, resolve and integrate seemingly conflicting views from the basis of a perspective that transcends any one particular point of view that does not run counter to the Scriptures.

Having to express oneself in another language means learning to adopt someone else's reference frame and to understand some of the subtleties of a culture, such as humor which is highly cultural specific. It is doubtful whether one can be bicultural without also being bilingual. The speaker can at least learn a few phrases to use in class.

In a classroom in another country jokes and irony need to be taboo to this speaker until he is absolutely sure of the other culture's conception of what represents humor. Even outside the classroom, one has to watch joking since a friendly insult, though in one culture would express warm sympathy (e.g., Netherlands--"you scoundrel" with the right intonation), in another culture where status is sacred (e.g., Indonesia), such an insult would be taken at face value.

The writer must remember that much of what students from poor countries learn at universities in rich countries is hardly relevant in their home country situation. It is therefore, very necessary to relate to the cultural context and realities.

1. Biblical Truth

God has given absolute truths which take precedence over all cultural beliefs. There are aspects of every culture that promote Christian values. God's truths do not vary from culture to culture. However, their expression and communication within a particular culture will be shaped and influenced by that culture (e.g., how to express the honoring of one's parents; cf. Acts 17:19-31 with 22:1-21).

2. Questions for the Teacher

In a teaching situation, the writer should ask himself: does this group think of themselves in individual or collective terms? How will they respond to being asked yes/no

questions? Is saying “no” considered impolite? What status does the writer have as a teacher in their eyes? How do they show respect for a professor?

It is also important for the speaker to ask: What are his own beliefs about this culture? Do these beliefs come from stereotypes (outsider perspectives) or archetypes (insider perspectives)? Is the teacher open to gaining new understanding?

3. Attitudes, Aptitudes, Affinities and Activities for the Teacher to Cultivate and Practice

There are attitudes the writer can continue to develop for closer cross-cultural relationships: be a learner; show humility; see God in the relationship; focus on the relationship; don't think your culture is best or try to prove it. He can also continue to develop certain aptitudes: understand the cultural lenses; know his own culture; learn the cultural specifics of each culture he interacts with; develop observational skills; learn appropriate ways to deal with cross-cultural conflict.

When possible, he can improve his affinities in order to develop closer cross-cultural relationships: look for common interests; find others who want to pursue cross-cultural relationships; develop cooperative projects with other culture groups; develop an emotional connection; connect with whole families. And he can put into action certain activities that will promote cross-cultural relationships: take initiative, don't be too direct; show interest, trust God, enjoy a meal together; share his own culture, ask questions; be flexible, pray; observe behaviors within the other person's cultural setting.

And certainly with students the teacher can: share his everyday relationship with God; ask how their faith meets their spiritual needs; pray for them; discover their interests; use Bible stories or biblical principles that teach a value which they respect.

Conclusion

Culture ascribes one's values, shapes ideas and teaches you “how” to think and what you believe. It plays a role in molding accepted and expected norms of behavior. It shows one how he or she will process experiences and derive meaning from them.

This teacher as well as other Christians may strive to have their values and behaviors shaped by biblical values but even in those endeavors there is the influence of culture. Culture shapes how scriptural teaching is prioritized and how it is applied to one's life.

Each Christian needs the Holy Spirit to intervene and move him or her beyond one's cultural parameters.

Yet with all of these challenges to effectively communicate in cross-cultural settings, there are communication processes and features that can be understood and put into practice. Recognizing the challenges that effective communication presents, helps one to understand and face those challenges. The writer believes that his ministry can and will be enhanced and improved as he applies the concepts and ideas learned in this course.

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