

Understanding Culture

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What is a culture, anyway? For the student just beginning the study of missionary anthropology, this question is often a first response to a confusing array of descriptions, definitions, comparisons, models, paradigms, etc. There is probably no more comprehensive word in the English language than the word "culture," or no more complex a field of study than cultural anthropology. Yet, a thorough understanding of the meaning of culture is prerequisite to any effective communication of God's good news to a different people group.

The most basic procedure in a study of culture is to become a master of one's own. Everyone has a culture. No one can ever divorce himself from his own culture. While it is true that anyone can grow to appreciate various different cultures, and even to communicate effectively in more than one, one can never rise above his own, or other cultures, to gain a truly supra-cultural perspective. For this reason, even the study of one's own culture is a difficult task. And to look objectively at something that is part of oneself so completely is nearly impossible.

One helpful method is to view a culture, visualizing several successive "layers," or levels of understanding, as one moves into the real heart of the culture. In doing so, the "man from Mars" technique is useful. In this exercise one simply imagines that a man from Mars has recently landed (via spaceship), and looks at things through the eyes of an alien space visitor.

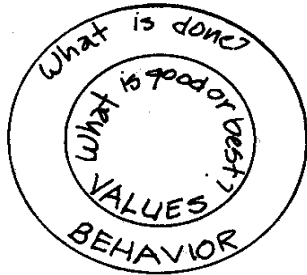
The first thing that the newly arrived visitor would notice is the people's *behavior*. This is the outer, and most superficial, layer of what would be observed by an alien.



What activities would he observe? What is being done? When walking into a classroom, our visitor may observe several interesting things. People are seen entering an enclosure through one or more openings. They distribute themselves throughout the room seemingly arbitrarily. Another person enters dressed quite differently than the rest, and moves quickly to an obviously prearranged position facing the others, and begins to speak. As all this is observed, the question might be asked, "Why are they in an enclosure? Why does the speaker dress differently? Why are many people seated while one stands?" These are questions of *meaning*. They are generated by the observations of behavior. It

might be interesting to ask some of the participants in the situation why they are doing things in a certain way. Some might offer one explanation; others might offer another. But some would probably shrug and say, "It's the way we do things here." This last response shows an important function of culture, to provide "the patterned way of doing things," as one group of missionary anthropologists defines it. You could call culture the "super-glue" which binds people together and gives them a sense of identity and continuity which is almost impenetrable. This identity is seen most obviously in the way things are done-behavior.

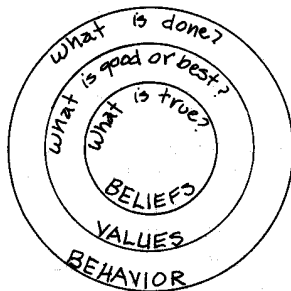
In observing the inhabitants, our alien begins to realize that many of the behaviors observed are apparently dictated by similar choices that people in the society have made. These choices inevitably reflect the issue of cultural *values*, the next layer of our view of culture. These issues always concern choices about what is "good," what is "beneficial," or what is "best."



If the man from Mars continued to interrogate the people in the enclosure, he might discover that they had numerous alternatives to spending their time there. They might have been working or playing instead of studying. Many of them chose to study because they believed it to be a better choice than play or work. He discovered a number of other choices they had made. Most of them had chosen to arrive at the enclosure in small four-wheel vehicles, because they view the ability to move about quickly as very beneficial. Furthermore, others were noticed hurrying into the enclosure several moments after the rest had entered, and again moving

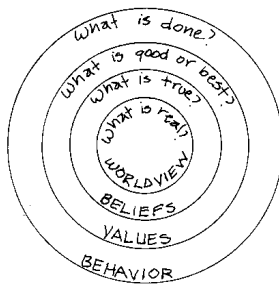
out of the room promptly at the close of the meeting. These people said that using time efficiently was very important to them. Values are "pre-set" decisions that a culture makes between choices commonly faced. It helps those who live within the culture to know what "should" or "ought" to be done in order to "fit in" or conform to the pattern of life.

Beyond the questions of behavior and values, we face a more fundamental question in the nature of culture. This takes us to a deeper level of understanding, that of cultural *beliefs*. These beliefs answer for that culture the question: "What is true?"



Values in culture are not selected arbitrarily, but invariably reflect an underlying system of beliefs. For example, in the classroom situation, one might discover upon further investigation that "education" in the enclosure has particular significance because of their perception of what is true about man, his power to reason, and his ability to solve problems. In that sense culture has been defined as "learned and shared ways of perceiving," or "shared cognitive orientation."

Interestingly, our alien interrogator might discover that different people in the enclosure, while exhibiting similar behavior and values, might profess totally different beliefs about them. Further, he might find that the values and behaviors were opposed to the beliefs which supposedly produced them. This problem arises from the confusion within the culture between operating beliefs (beliefs that affect values and behavior) and theoretical beliefs (stated creeds which have little practical impact on values and behavior).



At the very heart of any culture is its *worldview*, answering the most basic question: "What is real?" This area of culture concerns itself with the great "ultimate" questions of reality, questions which are seldom asked, but to which culture provides its most important answers. Few of the people our man from Mars questions have ever thought seriously about the deepest assumptions about life, which result in their presence in the classroom. Who are they? Where did they come from? Is there anything or anyone else occupying reality that should be taken into consideration? Is what they see really all there is, or is there something else, or something more? Is right now the

only time that is important? Or do events in the past, and the future, significantly impact their present experience? Every culture assumes specific answers to these questions, and those answers control and integrate every function, aspect, and component of the culture.

This understanding of worldview as the core of every culture explains the confusion many experience at the level of beliefs. One's own worldview provides a system of beliefs which are reflected in his actual values and behavior. Sometimes a new or competing system of beliefs is introduced, but the worldview remains unchallenged

A Servant's Heart How to Serve and Be An Encourager

by Jim Green
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Serving begins with the mindset that Jesus modeled when he was here on earth. Jesus, the ultimate “outsider”, became one with us, as the ultimate “insider”, by serving. He didn't come to be served but to serve. He didn't come to promote Himself or to build His own ministry, He came to build up others and help them build their ministry. He sought to glorify the Father through the success and fruitfulness of His disciples. “By this is my Father glorified, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be my disciples (John 15:8).”

The Lord of the universe didn't lord it over others, He served them. He was concerned with helping them to have fruitful ministries.

Various New Testament passages give instruction about the attitude of a servant and highlight the attitude of Jesus, the Servant. See for yourself what these Scriptures have to say.

It is obvious from the example of Jesus that the motives of our hearts affect the way we live. If we truly have the attitude of a servant, it will be lived out in our daily life. If our foundational desire is to build up the ministry of others, that is the way we will minister. We will take joy in building others up, humbling ourselves and serving others. This is not to say that we will never be tempted to exalt ourselves, but when we become aware of it we will confess and forsake it and order our lives and ministry to serve and encourage others to be all that God has created them to be.

Doing arises out of being. For a time we can do all the right things to play the role of a servant but eventually, if our heart is not in it, we either become exhausted from trying to live a life inconsistent with our true motives or we will fall back into a life style of serving ourselves.

Therefore, the first order of business in serving and encouraging others is to deal with our inner motives. If we find that we do not have the heart of a servant we need to confess it to our loving heavenly Father, and admit our pride and desire to be served rather than to serve. This is no surprise to Him. He already knows about our motives and loves us anyway.

When we walk in the light with Him about our wrong motives He cleanses us and keeps on cleansing us from all of our sin. We can then admit our total inability to change ourselves and ask Him to create within us a clean heart and fill us with His Spirit. It is only His Spirit who can fill us with His love, the love of a true servant. The Holy Spirit came to glorify Christ, that is to reproduce the humble, serving life of Christ in us. Christ is glorified when His children are reproducing His serving life style out of a pure heart by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Only the Holy Spirit can produce true servants in the image of Christ. Apart from the Holy Spirit even our “serving” can be self-serving or out of balance. Only the Holy Spirit can enable us to live a lifestyle of wise, faithful long-term service. Apart from Him

we can do nothing. Apart from Him we will soon grow tired of serving in the energy of the flesh. We will soon feel “put upon”, used and misused by others, leading to resentment and burn-out. Only when our serving arises out of the enabling of the Holy Spirit will we continue serving joyfully and consistently

The attitude of a servant is to help someone else to be all that God created them to be and to seek to build them up and encourage them. I Thess. 5:11 tells us to “encourage one another, and build up one another...” In verse 14 we are urged to “admonish the unruly, encourage the faint-hearted, help the weak, be patient with all men”. If our motive is to truly build them up, we will first begin to apply I Thess. 5:14 by seeking to discern what their present spiritual state is. Are they unruly, are they faint-hearted or are they weak?

Notice that each characteristic is dealt with in a different way. If they are unruly, they are to be admonished. If they are fainthearted, they are to be encouraged. If they are weak, they are to be helped. And by the way, we are to be patient with everyone.

The motive of a servant is to discern what a person's real needs are and to seek to help meet them in dependence on the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit gives wisdom and discernment. He knows the real and deepest needs of each one. He who knows their needs asks us to be His instrument of helping to meet these needs in the appropriate way.

If a person is unruly they do not need further encouragement in their unruliness. They need to be admonished and helped to face up to their disobedience. However, if a person is weak, they do not need to be admonished. That would only put them deeper in the hole of weakness. They need to be helped.

I remember when we had our first child. My wife was still weak after the delivery. Would I have served her well by admonishing her to be stronger or by sitting and encouraging her? No, what she really needed was physical help. She needed me to get up in the middle of the night and help with the baby since she was so exhausted. To serve her effectively at that time was to help her in her real need. At other times she may have needed encouragement or to be admonished, depending on her situation at the moment.

To insist on “serving” someone in an area that is not their real need results in our “service” becoming an imposition. If our motive is not that of a true servant we will be more interested in our own benefit than the benefit of the ones we are attempting to “serve”. Have you ever had someone insist that they do something for you that you really did not need or want them to do? Did you feel that they really served you, or did you feel that you were the object of their own self-serving?

Examining the principles of servanthood as outlined in Philippians 2:4-9 gives us some ways of evaluating our service to others. The following questions can be helpful in evaluating our progress in growing as a servant.

1. Are we serving people the way they need to be served, or according to our own desires?
2. Are we proud about all we have given up to help or serve others and do we make sure that everyone else knows about it?
3. Are we looking at others as better than ourselves, or as a means to make us feel better about ourselves?

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4. Do we value others' viewpoints and concerns as much as our own, or do we insist on our own way, even of how to help others?
5. Are we so caught up with our own interests and ideas that we have little interest or time to listen to or appreciate the interests and ideas of others?
6. In our conversations, do we dominate the time with our interests and ideas or do we really want to know what the other person thinks and feels?
7. Are we more interested in promoting our ideas, visions and strategies than in hearing the concerns and points of view of others?
8. Are we concerned that everyone knows what our title and authority are?
9. Are we threatened by the idea of losing our position or control over our lives?
10. Do we feel competitive with others and resent it when someone else is honored, or do we truly rejoice in the honors that come to others?
11. Do we resent it when we work hard on a project and do not receive as much notice and thanks as we feel we deserve?
12. Do we feel free to say no and/or communicate our "overload" when we receive requests that are beyond our Spirit-led ability or capacity?
13. Are we threatened by the "war stories" that others tell and wish we could tell something even more exciting and spectacular?
14. Do we willingly and joyfully give up our own privileges, position, power and platform to serve others, or do we resent it when we lose them?
15. Do we rejoice in serving others, or do we view it as "second-class" status and feel that we would be a better and more effective Christian worker if we were the "director"?
16. Do we try as much as possible to appreciate and understand the values and culture of those we are working with, or do we judge them from our own culture and values?
17. Do we joyfully try to avoid words and actions that are a stumbling block and use words and actions that are positive to the people we are working with? In other words, do we try to fit in with others rather than forcing them to conform to us?
18. Are we seeking to die daily to our own desires (even our most cherished desires) for the sake of Christ and those He loves?
19. Are we seeking to live a sacrificial life style or do we go after any desire that comes into our head?
20. Are we willing to die to our own desires, reputation and life for the benefit of others?

Obviously, every one of us comes up short when we examine ourselves against the perfect standard of Jesus Christ. However, we can be comforted by the fact that He loves us as we are and that we can walk in the light with Him day by day. As we see our failures in being a servant we can honestly admit them and claim His wonderful forgiveness. We can claim again His power to reproduce these qualities in our lives by the Holy Spirit.

Being a servant is more a matter of heart motive than knowing a list of rules of how to be a servant. If the heart is right, the results will be evident in the life. Therefore, the accent of this paper:

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“You call me teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. If I, then, the Lord and the Teacher, washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example that you also should do as I did to you. Truly, truly I say to you, a slave is not greater than his master; neither is one who is sent greater than the one who sent him. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.” John 13:13-17

Jesus taught us by example to serve one another. He shows us that serving one another is the Master's method of teaching. What greater model do we have? “If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.”

Lessons in Cross-Cultural Serving

As Paul said, "I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet..." but I have found these guidelines to be helpful in maintaining a servant attitude while being alert to the challenge of the field:

1. *Listen: Don't be too outspoken:* I am learning to actively listen—to unspoken words and nuances. As mainstream Americans, our tendency toward strong opinions and outspokenness intimidates people in many cultures. That's hard for us to understand. To us, it's simply being honest; to them, it says, "I don't want to hear your thoughts."
2. *Be sensitive to becoming an intimidating group:* For example a large team of Americans overwhelms people in many African cultures. People are afraid to be themselves. We need to be sensitive, and even avoid this predicament if possible.
3. *Make decisions with the counsel of those who are from our target culture:* I learned a lesson when a local person I had employed tried to take advantage of me financially. Now, I try never to make a financial decision without consulting one of our local pastors. It's difficult for an outsider to be discerning.

Serving the Lord by serving urban leadership is rewarding. As we help believers in other cultures become all they can be to reach their own cultures (and beyond) for Christ, God is glorified. After all, God is not looking for stars, but for servants. One day, true servants will receive stars in their crowns.

Article (slightly modified) was taken from "On Eagle's Wings", Oct/Nov 1987

In the spirit of the article above, take a few minutes and study the verses below answering each question:

Philippians 2:5-8 - What is Paul saying about humility in this passage?

Philippians 3:7 - Which specific things, that are now gain to you, might you someday have to count as loss for the sake of Christ?

I Corinthians 9:19-23 - In verse 22, what does Paul mean, "I have become all things to all men..."

What is Contextualization

Contextualization is a missiological concept, which refers to “any action that puts the gospel into a more understandable, culturally relevant form by including elements from a target culture’s customs, language, and traditions.” (David Racey, Missiologist).

Contextualization allows the ‘context’ (culture) in which the Scriptures are being applied to determine the most effective modes of communication and the most effective strategies, practices or activities through which evangelism and other forms of ministry can occur, in light of the dominant values and world view of the culture.

Byang Kato, the late African theologian has said, “The New Testament has given us the pattern for cultural adaptations. The incarnation itself is a form of contextualization. The Son of God condescended to pitch his tent among us to make it possible for us to be redeemed (John. 1:14. . . . Any method that helps the advance of Christ’s message should be employed [without watering down the gospel].” A fully contextualized ministry does not require persons to leave their culture in order to be disciplined, trained, or in other ways benefit from the ministry at hand.

Contextualizing a ministry is not just a matter of how it is structured--the kind of activities or music that is used but contextualizing incorporates an attitude toward the target culture which is culturally sensitive and adaptable in communication, and is done in love and with acceptance of differences.

Some elements of contextualized ministries are:

1. Understanding the missiological principle of cultural contextualization as an aid to evangelism
2. Paying attention to music as a key cultural element, affects worship styles e.g. Hispanics music incorporates much freedom of expression.
3. Recognition and awareness of historical elements and sociological elements important to the group. (E.g. impact of slavery, segregation on black American community; WWII internment of Japanese Americans has had impact on Japanese American cultural identity)
4. Awareness of and respect for the customs, traditions, and language of the culture. Customs and traditions must be recognized, incorporated, and celebrated [unless Christian values are clearly denied].

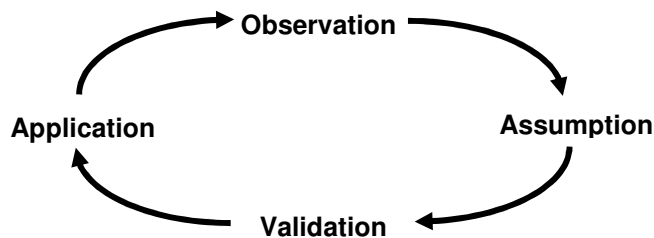
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- a. Special dates – keep a calendar of these. For example M.L. King, Jr. Birthday events, Cinco de Mayo, Chinese New Year
 - b. Special personalities meaningful to the culture?
 - c. World views and values taken into account
5. Empathy with community needs and concerns. Willingness to dialog with members of the target group about culturally sensitive issues. Incorporate cultural sensitivity training if necessary into your ministry of discipleship or the organization involved. Community service can enhance awareness and compassion and sensitivity, as well as opportunities for the gospel.
6. Awareness of current political, social, economic, and religious issues, which are bought to bear on that group.
 - a. affects planning of programs, sensitivity to families, etc.
7. Preparation for reconciliation, addressing heart issues, getting beneath the surface, use of experiential exercises can be instructive as well as cathartic. Praying together with those from whom there is alienation.
8. Recruiting, training, and mobilizing ethnic leaders for contextualized and cross-cultural ministries. Ethnic churches and organizations can place you in touch with potential laborers.

Learning About the World Around You

The Field Observation Cycle

In addition to ministering cross-culturally with the heart attitude of a **servant**, it is also important to go as a **learner**. You can apply this principle by observing things in the culture. The heart of any cultural analysis process must be the acquisition of specific, validated information. This is a vital step in becoming an "insider" to the culture. The Field Observation Cycle is a method of such information gathering and is depicted and explained below:



1. **Observation** - The heart of the Field Observation Cycle is observation. Webster defines observation as "seeing and noticing." This definition is a good point of departure, and we want to expand "seeing and noticing" to involve all our senses (hearing, touch, etc.). Observation then is noticing (perceiving) with all our senses (i.e., the ways people relate to each other, emotions, non-verbal communication, etc.). Observations should be made in high volume and recorded/kept in a notebook for reference.
2. **Assumption** - The next step in the process is to try and make sense out of, or understand what you have observed. You can do this by making an assumption as to what you observed. Basically, an assumption is an educated guess about the meaning of your observation. A useful assumption may be developed by asking yourself these types of questions: "What does this mean to them?" "Why do they do or say that?"; or "What does this show about their culture?" The point that is being made here is to not stop with your observation, but to try to make sense out of it. Your initial assumption may be in error, but you are moving toward understanding. You may in fact have more than one assumption for a given observation. Make note of these.
3. **Validation** - This step in the process is the checkpoint. At this stage assumptions are checked for validity. You should thoroughly validate your assumptions for accuracy. You can do this by additional observation, interview, experimentation and/or reading and researching. In the process of validation you should discard or modify any assumptions shown to be inaccurate. The end result should be new information that you can act upon.
4. **Application** - Once an assumption has been substantially validated, you should see if the information can be applied to your experience. Questions such as "What does this mean to me?" and "How will this affect my living and ministering in this culture?" can help turn an observation into knowledge that can positively affect the choices you make for your life and ministry in the new culture.

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