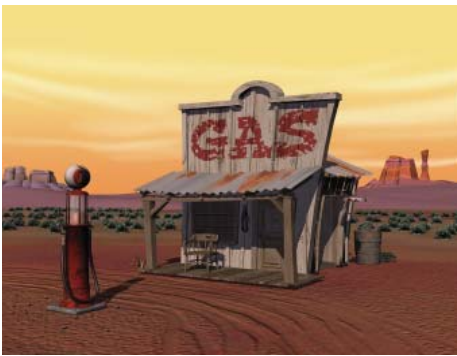


Understanding Culture

It is just minutes before the church service starts when Duane's excitement about being a guest preacher at a church in South Africa turned to anxiety. He realized he was lost in an unfamiliar town with no idea if he would even make it to the service he was leading. In an effort to find his way, Duane pulled into a local gas station to ask for directions. As Duane explained his problem and need for directions, the attendant peered to the left and right, seemingly orienting himself to give the best directions. Duane thanked the kind man after receiving directions and hurried back into his car, on the road again in search for the church. Each mile he drove Duane became more and more wary of the directions he was given. He eventually reached the point where he knew the directions were wrong.



Frustrated, he began to wonder why the attendant at the gas station would have done such a thing. Was he just irresponsible or downright deceptive?¹

Duane's reaction was no different

1 Elmer, Duane. *Cross Cultural Conflict*. Intervarsity, Downers Grove. 1993. 11-20

than any of ours would have been. But what he realized after spending time in South Africa was that his reaction to that situation was completely wrong. Granted, Duane had the right to be frustrated since he was lost, but he had no right to make judgment or accusations towards the attendant who misguided him. Why? Because the attendant did the right thing. The only problem was the right thing in one culture seems like the wrong thing in another, instead of just being seen as different.

Here are a few reasons the gas station attendant did what he did:²

1. African culture values relationship over truth. Being courteous to a stranger and helping the needy are highly valued in this culture, so the attendant wanted to do what he could to not disappoint Duane – someone in need. So rather than disappoint Duane by being unable to help, the man gave his best attempt at giving directions. [Flipping the situation: If the attendant was in America and asked you for directions and you said "I am not sure," though you were trying to be helpful, he would have seen you as cold, rude, and unwilling to help.]
2. Africa values not losing face. This is the idea of avoiding embarrassment or

2 Ibid

humiliation. Though all of us try to avoid this, in many Eastern cultures, this is an extremely big deal that doesn't just end with blushing for a few minutes. If the attendant admitted he could not help, it would have brought him shame and loss of face.

3. The majority of people in South Africa travel by foot or public transportation. The walker uses rocks, trees, and buildings for guideposts while the driver uses miles, numbers, and street signs. This difference could be why the directions were not received as intended.

All of this is a lesson in culture. Different cultures have different values and practices. What complicates our understanding of culture is the fact that there are subcultures within cultures. So a white middle class teenage boy brought up in a Christian family is in a different subculture as a white middle class teenage boy brought up in a Hindu family. Culture is more than ethnicity and income; it is tradition, beliefs, practices, views, etc. This is why it is so important to understand people

Though most of us will never go to South Africa, we should learn from this story and let it change the way we see others. Instead of always seeing our way of thinking and doing as right, we need to see it as different. Instead of jumping to conclusions, we need to try to understand the why behind the action. Instead of forming prejudices, we need to form understandings. God is the author of diversity and desires us to be



unified (in mission) through our diversity (practice and form). This is a call to everyone reading this to begin to see things through other's lenses. If I had never seen eyeglasses, I would form conclusions (wrongly) as to why people wore them. But after trying them on and noticing how clearly I could now see, then I would understand. We need to look through the lenses of different cultures to see the world through others eyes, and in doing so we will form better relationships with those different from us and be able to better share the gospel with them.

Culture and Scripture

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” –Jn 1:1,14

The incarnation, Jesus becoming flesh, displays Jesus passion for us to know Him. He didn't just sit on his heavenly throne telling us we need to be like him. He didn't come as an earthly king or someone with status. He came and dwelt as a normal person. In fact, Isaiah 53 tells us he wasn't even good looking. Why does this matter? Well, for our conversation about culture, it shows that Jesus came and entered the

culture in which he wanted to reach - humanity. To reach the “sinners” he went to parties and ate with them, risking his reputation. To reach the Jews he studied and understood their beliefs and practices. As you read through the gospels it is evident that Jesus knew the Jewish culture well and this made his teaching relevant and understandable to those he taught. He proclaimed the message of salvation to the Jews in a way they understood because he took the time to understand the people which he desired to reach. Nothing could have been more effective.³

With this in mind, I feel there are several implications we must draw from the incarnation:

1. Jesus was the initiator, not others. After the resurrection, he tells us to be the initiators (Mt 28), not others. So we are to go into other cultures and proclaim the good news of

³ The effectiveness of what Jesus taught is shown in the crucifixion. It shows that the Jews understood His teaching, but rejected it. If he hadn't understood their culture, Jesus would have taught in a way that made the Jews continue to practice what they practiced, and continue to believe what they believed. The conviction of His message caused some Jews to repent and follow Him, and others to get angry and kill Him. There wasn't neutrality with the message.

Jesus Christ. But we are to do it as Jesus did, as one who understands the people we are trying to reach, and not merely as an outsider looking in.

2. Entering into another culture is not supposed to be easy. For Jesus, he left the most glorious of places to enter a place where he would be mocked, disrespected, blasphemed, beaten, and eventually killed. But Jesus knew what he was doing, and found it worth the sacrifice for people to be saved. Will we do as Jesus did and leave the comforts of our culture to enter into others culture? This requires us doing things we would not prefer to do for the sake of the gospel. It could be as simple as eating a food from their culture that disgusts you, to entering the life of an abused child, to going to a culture where being a Christian brings death threats. There is not single way to do this. Everyone is called to something different, but we are all called to share the gospel. None of us are called to merely hang around people just like us for the rest of our lives. We are called to get out of our comfort zones and enter people's lives so we can better communicate the beauties of Christ to them.
3. The end goal was not cultural understanding, but gospel proclamation. The purpose of getting to know people and understanding culture is not just to make friends to have diversity in your life. The goal is so you might

better understand their hopes and desires so you can communicate who Jesus is in a way that they understand.

4. We are not to expect others to conform to our way of doing things. So if someone enters our church and doesn't like our music, our tradition, our pews, our whatever...that is okay. What matters is who and what we believe. Our way is not the way. In fact, our way could very well be hindering others. Our tendency is to choose our preference over the preference of our culture. Jesus chose the culture preference over his. Why? Because it doesn't matter how you worship, what you eat, how you dress. Jesus is not after a particular tradition or form of worship. He is after our hearts. Unfortunately, far too often the church is more concerned with how they want things to be done than how to best reach their community with the gospel of Jesus Christ. What are you choosing?

sometimes it does), it often starts with the neighbor next-door.

In writing this article, my original intent was to help us all learn how to better understand different cultures and people (which I still plan to do in another article). But in looking out into our church and others I have realized that we need to first grasp why understanding different cultures is important, before going into what that looks like. My hope and prayer is that you see the deep need to saturate ourselves in other cultures as we seek to make disciples of *all* nations. All nations no longer requires us to get on a plane (though