THE RELATION BETWEEN GOSPEL AND CULTURE FROM A MISSIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

1) INTRODUCTION

Much work has been done so far by many scholars concerning Gospel and culture from a Missiological perspective. The challenge is that every time we evangelize in a new dark place, both Gospel and the local culture must be run into each other, they are very different, as the Gospel is the Word of God revealed only in the Bible; but the culture, in general view, is the commonly acquired customs and values shared by people living together in a society, and inherited “intergenerationally”.

Yet, both are closely interconnected for the indigenous people to be deeply rooted in the Christian faith. How then they both can be encountered? Three different viewpoints have been arising finding out solution to that problem: Gospel against culture, Gospel relevant to culture, and the Gospel transforming Culture. In this short essay, we are going to discuss this issue by closely analyzing those three views, and after, we will discuss what should be going on when we evangelize in a new dark place about that.

2) GOSPEL AGAINST CULTURE

To begin with, we need to remember that the Gospel is always something new to the new place where it is proclaimed for the first time as being God’s self-revelation given to us only in the Bible. Thus, there must be many practical lives and customs of the indigenous people that such Gospel is against. Paul Hiebert, in “The Gospel in Human Contexts” develops three distinct theories about contextualization, one of them is what he says as the “noncontextualization” in which he regards the Gospel as “acultural… in its very nature” for the reason that it is the ultimate truth which cannot be modified nor codified by any cultural values.

Andrew Kirk emphasizes that idea by mentioning “the counter-cultural force of the Gospel”, and he goes on saying that “…passing the cultural trends or fashions should never determine its ultimate validity and cogency”. That idea does not go

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wrong immediately, Marianne Skjortnes, for example, while working in Madagascar as missionary, discovered one of the Malagasy cultural practices that is called as “the girl market”, in which she says that “this is girls way of contributing financially to the household by offering their sexual services in exchange for money”. Having in mind the Biblically behavioral ethics and also the call of Jesus to His followers to love one another as He has loved them, we can say undoubtedly that this culture is never tolerable for the Gospel.

It becomes explicit then that, being aware of this view, one must be acquainted well with both the basic teaching of the Gospel, which is for all in different times and places, and the culture of the home-grown people. It is firstly remembered that the heart of the Gospel is overshadowed by cultural practices, values, and the customs of the people in its time that need to be well discerned in order for the heart of the Gospel to be shown up. Paul Hiebert explains it in this way:

“While affirming that Scripture is divine revelation, it is important to keep in mind that the Scriptures themselves were given to humans in particular historical and sociocultural contexts (fig. 1.9). This is obvious to Old and New Testament scholars but is often overlooked by ordinary Christians. Differentiating between eternal truth and the particular contexts in the Bible is not an easy task, but is essential if we are to understand the heart of the gospel, which is for everyone”.7

Additionally, it is also compulsory to know the culture of the local people, including the language, values, worldviews, customs, and ethics, etc. The preacher then should be the one who is always active in learning and asking questions, like why do people behave like this or why they do this thing? etc. Thus, evangelization needs a close awareness of the heart of the Gospel with its firmly required ethics that stands against all the locally unscriptural cultures. There are, however, some cultural issues that the Gospel agrees, as we proceed the following.

GOSPEL RELEVANT TO CULTURE

Despite what we have mentioned before, it is also undeniable that there are some cultural practices stand appropriately to the Gospel. In his work “The Gospel as Prisoner and Liberator of Culture”, Andrew Walls says “the Christian faith as a place to feel at home for people at every

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time and place”. He further explains that the Gospel should be interpreted in different ways depending on the place and time where and when it is proclaimed, so, the way the first century Christians lived and interpreted the Gospel in Jerusalem was different from those in the fourth century in Nicea, and also different from those in Africa in twentieth century, etc. That means that in various places, there must be cultural values that agree with the Gospel, but need a new Biblical reinterpretation in order to be well in accord with the Holy Scripture, and that what is called “Contextualization/Inculturation of the Gospel”, (Acts 17:16-34).

However, it needs to be reminded that such contextualization is not possible unless we closely analyze what is culturally going on in the place where we are evangelizing. That is, before evangelizing, one needs to be well acquainted with the culture of the indigenous people. Max Warren, as reported by Bevans and Schroeder, explains such necessity in a severely way that “Our first task in approaching another people, another culture… is to take off our shoes, for the place we are approaching is holy!” The idea that is there behind such severe statement is that, as still said by Bevans and Schroeder, “… the profound openness to the place and to the people in which and among whom one works”. When we shortly glimpse at the Bible, we see Paul’s contextualization when he encountered the Athenian culture according to Acts 17:16-32. The third view that we will finally deal with is the Gospel transforming culture.

5) GOSPEL TRANSFORMING CULTURE

This view seems to be in the middle of those two ones that have previously been elucidated. However, it goes a bit further because those two viewpoints mentioned above can be encompassed in it. It means that, the gospel enters into one culture, changes gradually such culture, either those cultural values and customs that the Bible is against or agrees (but just need a new scriptural

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meaning). Charles H. Kraft clarifies it with the parable of Jesus about the kingdom of heaven which is like leaven that a woman took, and put in three measures of meal, until it was all leavened. (Matthew 13:33). That is exactly the case in a new place where the heart of the Gospel is well proclaimed and the natives, as a result, totally surrender themselves to Christ.

It does not mean, however, that the people slowly abandon their current culture involuntarily. Actually, culture is dynamically changeable, but the difference here is that it is the Word of God which is well preached results in such gradual changes, aiming at the whole culture to be Scriptural. Thus, the one who preaches allows the people themselves to voluntarily evaluate their own culture in the light of the Gospel and be progressively transformed until the entire cultural values, ethics, and customs become Biblical, as explained the following by Paul Hiebert:

“In transformation, we need to involve people in evaluating their own cultures in the light of new truth...They know their old culture better than we do and are in a better position to critique it and live transformed lives within it, once they have biblical instruction. We can bring outside views that help them see their own cultural biases, but they are the ones who make decisions as they grow spiritually through learning discernment and applying scriptural teachings to their own lives.”

6) CONCLUSION

By summarizing, in missiological perspective, both Gospel and culture are inseparable. Even though each of them has their own characteristics that make them different from each other, they are closely linked for the Gospel “to feel at home” and the people feel deeply rooted in the Christian faith. They, sometimes, disagree with each other as some cultural ethics, customs or even values that the Gospel stands against. In this case, the Holy Scripture must be overvalued rather than the culture. Contrarily, the Gospel is not necessarily against the cultures, there are some cultural values and ethics that are in agreement with the Bible, just the new scriptural meaning is required. However, in interweaving each other, the Gospel remains mostly transformative to culture. Such transformation happens automatically as long as the people heartedly receive the Gospel and get repentant. That is, they just evaluate their cultures, and voluntarily change it.

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BIBLIOGRAPHY


