

# FOLLOW CHRIST'S EXAMPLE

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Let us look at the words of the Lord Jesus that we find in John 20:21; once again words addressed to His disciples. "Jesus said to them again: Peace be with you! Just as the Father sent me, so I send you." As often happens, the key lies in the small words, in this case "just as". "Just as" the Father sent me—and how was that, what did the Father do? Rather, what did the Son do upon being sent? Did He stay at home, so to speak? No, He left His 'home', He left His 'country', He came down here. And what did He do once He was here? He took on flesh and blood, He identified Himself with us. "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14). Even more than the Apostle Paul, Jesus is the supreme example of what a transcultural missionary is to be and do. He covered the greatest 'distance'; He humbled Himself the most.

As we have seen, Christ's missionary commands and strategies have to do with **transcultural** work, of necessity. The 2,000 ethnic nations without a witness and the 3 billion people who have never heard represent precisely a transcultural challenge; if they are to be reached someone must face and overcome a barrier of language and culture. Whoever undertakes such a ministry should follow Christ's example, which reflects certain basic attitudes. All the other strategies, already discussed, are relevant to all of God's people, and some may even be more important for those who stay at home than for those who go to the foreign field, but this seventh strategy<sup>1</sup> is primarily for the missionary. Although, with a little more thought we may find some very practical applications for those who never leave their home town, as well. We turn now to the basic attitudes.

## Identify Yourself

The Word "became flesh and dwelt among us". God the Son accepted the body that had been prepared for Him (Hebrews 10:5); He really identified Himself with us. Thinking of that time and place, Jesus ate what they did, spoke their language, lived as a poor man among a poor people; in short, He put on their 'skin', as it were. We also have Paul's example. He declares his procedure in 1 Corinthians 9:20-22.

20 I became as Jew among the Jews, to win the Jews; as under the law among those under the law, to win those under the law;

21 as without law among those without law (. . .), to win those without law.

22 I became as weak among the weak, to win the weak. I became all things to all men so that I might by all means win some.

Then in verses 24 and 25 he gives the example of athletes who subject themselves to certain disciplines so as to attain the goal.

It is clear that Paul worked at identifying himself with the people, or the individuals, that he was trying to win to Christ. In the history of modern transcultural missions there has been a good deal of failure in this area. There is no lack of cases where a missionary has not been sensitive to the culture, and even the language, of the people he was trying to reach. At times there are features of a culture that are objectively sinful, practices that the Bible plainly forbids, and a messenger of Christ may not participate in such, but any unnecessary failure to identify will diminish the worker's efficiency. It will delay their acceptance of him as a person, which will delay their acceptance of the Gospel. If a people rejects a messenger they will also reject his message. The strategic effect of this attitude is such that it merits further consideration.

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<sup>1</sup> The seven strategies are:

- 1) Pray to the Lord of the harvest for laborers—being consistent.
- 2) **Simultaneously** reach our Jerusalem, our Judea and Samaria, and the ends of the earth.
- 3) Preach the Gospel to every person—for no one is innocent.
- 4) Make **disciples**, not just converts.
- 5) Live for the Kingdom of God, not yourself.
- 6) Liberate people from the power of Satan.
- 7) Follow Jesus' example.

### *Try for a 're-birth'*

The easiest way to learn the language and culture of a people is as a child, being born in their midst. It happens that we no longer have that option; we begin our missionary careers as adults. Still, I believe we should set ourselves the goal of working for a re-birth, as it were, in the target language and culture. That is to say, we should consciously work toward learning the language and culture to the point where we feel 'at home' in them, work toward the day when the group no longer looks on us as outsiders. To this end we need to 'die' to our own culture, while living among them. It is not a question of rejecting our own culture in any absolute sense, because when we return to our home country we must return to our home culture as well. We become bilingual and bicultural, or trilingual and tricultural, etc. But while living among another people we need to do all we can to understand and take on their culture—it is an important tactic for winning them to Christ.

Very well, let us suppose that God gives us the assignment of making disciples among a people that has never heard of Christ. Now what, how should we proceed? When dealing with a culture that has not been formally studied and a language that has never been written there will be no course anywhere in the world to teach us that language and culture. The only solution is to go to where they are and ask permission to live among them. There will almost always be some sort of trade language and some avenue of peaceful contact to provide a non-threatening context in which to present the request—it would be unreasonable to expect them to welcome a stranger with enthusiasm; it is enough that they tolerate our presence, for a start. To attempt contact with a 'wild' group demands wisdom and prudence, and specific direction from God.

To live in a 'primitive' village, for example, is like being in another world—different food (sometimes very different), a 'house' made of thatch or mud, strange customs that can even be revolting, no hygiene (at least as we see it), and a language that is so complex that it is easy to despair of ever being able to communicate the Gospel freely in that place. It is a daunting challenge, no doubt, but the apostle must accept it. The people themselves will most probably test your willingness to identify with them. In our own case my wife and I had to eat palm grubs (they eat them raw but allowed us to fry them!). They probably would not have harmed us if we refused, but what would the consequences have been if we had? We would have failed the test. It would have been a defeat for us; they would have said something like: "If that's the way you want to be, you can just paddle your own canoe!" Try as we may, in the beginning we will be strange and different, but we need to work hard to diminish the cultural barrier that separates us from the people, to **diminish** it rather than enlarge it.

The key to a people's heart is their mother tongue. A self-respecting apostle will not rest until he controls the language of the group he wants to disciple. Until he does he will continue to be an outsider. Worse still, a missionary who does not control the language of the people is condemning the Gospel to be always foreign, something on the outside. How could you?! A people's language is the key to their heart; woe to the messenger of Christ who does not give due respect to this factor!

I would say that the most usual failing in missionary practice is lack of identification (with the people): due to faulty orientation, preparation or even personal disposition the worker falls shy of the mark. However, it is possible to identify very selectively, which can also be damaging—the damage would result from a lack of appreciation for the whole picture precisely because the person could not be bothered to try for a comprehensive understanding of the language and culture. It is easy to become taken up with social, political and economic problems, but you cannot be too careful.

### *Watch Out for Political and Economic Interests*

To achieve a reasonable control of a language and culture (in a pioneer situation) can easily take at least two years. Faced with the frustration of not being able to transmit God's Word during that time one can easily turn to political and economic problems as an 'escape valve', as a way to 'help' the people. But one's ignorance of the people's worldview can set up a booby-trap. You can easily wind up trying to impose 'solutions' that derive their 'validity' from your own worldview but which are not sensitive to theirs—a form of imperialism or paternalism. There is also the danger of creating dependencies. At times one falls into the trap 'innocently', because of not thinking through the implications. But, in our day there are those who vigorously propagate a social interpretation of the Gospel, a marxist hermeneutic that is imposed on the Bible (when it isn't marxist ideology, pure and simple), and they teach that the missionary should concentrate his efforts precisely in the social arena, whether or not he speaks the language or understands the culture.

You cannot be too careful! Our viewpoint should be God centered and not man centered. Do not stumble into the stupidity of serving selfish interests, and do not create false hope. Any activity based on humanistic or materialistic presuppositions will likely yield bitter fruit. Selfish interest is selfish interest, whoever it may be. The Gospel of Jesus Christ does not exist to satisfy our selfish interests; rather it exists to satisfy **the glory of God**. Consider the Lord's own teaching on the subject.

First, let us look at His words as recorded in Matthew 5:38-41.

38 You have heard that it was said, "an eye for an eye" and "a tooth for a tooth".  
 39 But I tell you not to resist the evil doer; if someone hits you on your right cheek offer the left one as well;  
 40 and if someone sues you for your cape give him your coat also;  
 41 and if someone obliges you to go with him one mile, go two.

Well, have you really thought about that? Just a little difficult to put into practice, wouldn't you say? But there it is. The 'second mile' invites further comment. In the Roman Empire, in any conquered country, a Roman soldier could force a local citizen to carry his pack for one mile. Now that is a humiliating and unjust situation for you! Talk about conquest and exploitation! So why did Jesus not say to spit in the soldier's face and fight to free the land from the imperialistic oppression?

In Matthew 22:17-21 Jesus said to pay tribute to Caesar, Caesar the conqueror, Caesar the exploiter, Caesar the unjust. In Luke 12:14-15 someone asked Jesus to take sides in a matter of selfish interest, but He responded with general principles that have the power to transform lives and societies; however, these principles must be embraced freely, they may not be imposed by force.

Now let us look at Luke 7:18-22. John the Baptizer sent some men to ask Jesus directly if He was the Messiah. After they had watched Him cure a variety of people He said: "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised and to the poor the Gospel is preached." **To the poor the Gospel is preached.** There is nothing about passing out weapons, about organized revolt, about demanding a more 'just' distribution of material goods. To the poor the Gospel is preached. Now then, in this same passage Jesus responded to physical suffering with compassion—He healed all the sick that came to Him. To heal, yes; to involve oneself in political or economic controversy, no.

It is not the case that Jesus lacked courage or conviction; He even used violence on occasion. In John 2:14-17 He used physical violence to cleanse the temple. In Acts 13:6-11 Paul might be said to have been 'violent' with Elimas. The same could be said about Peter with Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-10) and with Simon (Acts 8:18-24). Such energetic reactions on the part of the Lord Jesus or the Apostles were always in defense of spiritual principles, not questions of politics or economics.

Romans 13:1-2 and 1 Peter 2:13-18 give us a relevant Biblical principle—civil authorities are from God (strange though that seems at times). Whoever preaches hate and violence is not of God. Indeed, it is impossible to be a Christian and a Marxist at the same time—they are inimical ideologies.

I wish to make clear that what has been said above about involvement in matters political and economic is to be applied only to a missionary who is among a people where he is not a native. Within our own culture we can and should have an influence upon the political and economic reality, acting in a responsible manner.

### **Humble Yourself**

Another basic attitude that the Lord Jesus exemplified is stated in Philippians 2:5-8.

05 Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus,  
 06 who, although subsisting in the form of God, determined not to clutch His being equal with God,  
 07 but emptied Himself, taking on the form of a slave by becoming the image of a man;  
 08 and being found in human shape He humbled Himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross!

**He humbled Himself!** Anyone who is not willing to be humbled will be no good as a missionary. Actually, a proud, arrogant person is of little use anywhere in God's kingdom. The Bible is clear: "God resists the proud" (James 4:6 and 1 Peter 5:5). To become proud is a sure way to turn God against you, and no servant of Jesus Christ can afford to let that happen. But when it comes to transcultural work we do not really have a choice—the missionary will be humiliated whether he likes it or not, and several times a day.

When we first went to the Apurinã people both my wife and I had done graduate work. Someone might suppose that we went to the jungle to teach the 'Indian'. Well, perhaps one day, but in the beginning we had to learn from them—when it comes to living in the jungle they are the masters, our college degrees make little difference. In a small close-knit society each person has a role or function, so it is predictable that they will try to fit us into a niche also. If you try to help them medically you may be viewed as a shaman, if you try to make basic trade goods more affordable you may be viewed as a merchant, etc. But the first role we fill is that of a learner, learner of language and culture.

So what is wrong with that? Well, in such cultures learner of language and culture is the role of a child! I remember it well—after only two months or so in the village someone said to me: "Wilbur, what is your problem? Our children speak the language well by the time they are five years old, but here you are, a grown man, and can't manage it. What's wrong with you?!" I must admit that it hurt a little, and it happened more than once. My wife also suffered—one of the women liked to make fun of her efforts to speak; she would ridicule her without mercy. At times my wife would become distressed, to the point that the other women would feel sorry for her and tell the first one to lay off. It is not easy.

Folks often think of a jungle Indian (for example) as being an exotic figure, but I want to say that when we first arrive in their village **we** are the strange and different ones. It is as good as a circus! There is a constant audience observing all that we do and have—observing and commenting! Their comments are sprinkled with titters (and occasional bursts of laughter), and we cannot understand a thing—well, we know they are laughing at **us**, we just cannot understand what they are saying. If space permitted I could give further examples at great length, but I think enough has been said to make the point. You may be sure that ignorance of the language and culture will serve up humiliating experiences to the missionary every day. On top of them there will be no lack of other things to test our humility. We really need to have "the same mind that was also in Christ Jesus".

### Limit Yourself

In Matthew 15:21-28 we find a moving account. A certain Canaanite woman cried out to Jesus asking deliverance for her daughter. He paid no attention. But since she would not stop crying out the disciples finally asked Him to do something. Whereupon Jesus said: "I was only sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (verse 24). There follows a conversation between Jesus and the woman where she gives an example of humility almost without equal in the Scriptures, and she received her "crumb". But our concern at the moment is with the Lord's declaration in verse 24—during His earthly ministry He limited Himself. He concentrated His efforts on reaching just one people. He gave an occasional 'crumb' to others, but did not allow such to distract Him from His ministry to the people of Israel. It was on the cross that He would "draw all" to Himself (John 12:32), but just before saying that He apparently refused to receive some Greeks (John 12:20-23), even though He was only a few days from that cross.

A transcultural missionary needs to know how to limit himself, and especially in a pioneer situation. It will be hard and long even if he concentrates his efforts on reaching just one people. If he splinters or dilutes his effort it is unlikely that he will succeed in winning the people to Christ. For this reason, in my opinion, the 'tent-maker' strategy will not be viable for pioneer work among unreached peoples. The apostolic function requires one's total effort.

It is a question of purpose and responsibility, in the sense of commission or task. If Jesus sends me to make disciples among a certain ethnic group then that is my task. Unfortunately, to work with a minority people is like entering a war zone. Minority peoples are always exploited by the dominant culture. There is always prejudice, of race, religion, culture or whatever—always! There are always conflicting interests, be they economic, political, personal or whatever—always! To work with a minority people is like entering a war zone.

The village where we went to live was about an hour's walk into the jungle from a town on the banks of the Purus River. The townspeople were insulted by our choice (to live with the 'Indians' rather than with

them), they did not like it one little bit. Our presence would proportion some advantage and protection to a group they despised and exploited. But our task was to reach the village, not the town (in fact, there already was an evangelical church in the town, with which we maintained good relations). If we had chosen to live in the town the villagers would have understood that we were identifying with their exploiters, which would have created a psychological barrier that would have hindered us for quite a while. Even against our preference, we are sometimes obliged to take sides, obliged by the social tensions that exist and by the very people we are trying to reach. It is a question of purpose and responsibility.

One other point should be made here. When it comes to working with a minority group, a foreigner will often fare better than a citizen of the country, because of the conflicts that exist and because he has not been a party to those conflicts. In many parts of the world neighboring peoples have been at odds for centuries, and there is hate and bitterness that only God can heal. In such a context, someone who is obviously a foreigner may be received with less reserve than someone who could be an 'enemy'. On the other hand, the political climate at the national level is often just the opposite. I have no solution to offer, unless it be the use of our spiritual weapons (2 Corinthians 10:4-5), I am just recording the problem. We need to be forewarned, and prepared to face limitations.

### Be Respectful

Although I have no text in support of this attitude, it would seem to be obvious and implicit in the need to identify. Culture is a necessity. In essence it is the sum of the behavioral norms that a given community adopts or recognizes. Only a hermit can do without it. No culture is all good, nor all bad. The expression 'pagan culture' should not be understood to mean something useless. Whether one eats with a fork, a spoon, chopsticks or fingers is not a question of morals; whether one sleeps in a bed, a hammock or on the ground, ditto. Many practices are morally neutral; they are merely a matter of custom. Anytime two or more people wish to co-exist peacefully in the same area, culture must exist.

A transcultural missionary needs to know how to respect the culture of his target people. He should not arrive with the idea of imposing changes upon them. The Gospel may not be imposed. God Himself is not interested in pretended worship, in forced 'obedience' (at least in this age of grace). He wants sincere worship, obedience that comes from the heart (John 4:23-24). When we impose some change upon a group, but they do not understand or have conviction about it, we not only create hypocrites but we run the risk of creating a vacuum. When a people abandons some practice because of outside pressure, the reason why they did it is no longer covered and the consequences are frequently negative.

In any event, if you feel that you just have to do something about some practice, please, try to understand the purpose first. It is almost inevitable that a pioneer missionary will encounter practices that strike him as being absurd, immoral, horrifying and even criminal. What to do? **Try to learn the purpose!** Consider just one example. In many indigenous cultures, when a woman gives birth the father of the child takes to his hammock and stays there for a week, or more—the woman has to get up and work as usual. I can imagine that some would feel quite put out upon witnessing such a scene. So let us suppose that you decide to 'rectify' the situation; you begin to berate the man, you really tell him off, you carry on to such an extent that he finally gets up and goes to work. Well, it would have been good to understand the reasons for that procedure. It is like this: they believe that in some mysterious way, during the first days of a child's life, whatever energy the father is able to conserve is transferred to that child, thereby ensuring its health and well-being. Your own opinion about that idea is beside the point—that is what **they** believe and that is why the man acted as he did. Now let us consider the consequences of your interference: if the baby gets sick the father will be held responsible (he deprived his child of the necessary strength), and if the baby should die, . . . One more thing, when a man takes to his hammock like that he is recognizing the legitimacy of the child; if he does not do it he is declaring to the community that the baby is not his! The social implications are serious and far-reaching.

Friends, it is better not to interfere; it is better to leave such initiatives to the Holy Spirit. Let us work toward furnishing the Word of God as soon as possible so they can be converted and become true disciples of Jesus Christ. Then they too will have the indwelling Holy Spirit and He will bring about the necessary changes in their culture. When we let Him do it we see the following: He changes some things that we had not considered and leaves intact others that we would change. In this way each culture reflects the grace of God a little differently, like the different facets of a diamond.

It is true, unfortunately, that there have been cases where a missionary has caused some damage to a culture (it is also true that some who make a business out of criticizing missionaries cause much more damage themselves when they deal with indigenous peoples). A missionary may cause some damage, it has happened, but he does not 'destroy' the culture, as is sometimes alleged. It is important to distinguish between a missionary and the Gospel. The Gospel does not destroy cultures, nor does it damage them—the Gospel **perfects** cultures, any and all, including our own. We urgently need to create an awareness and enhance our ability to distinguish between the Word of God and our own religious culture. Much of what we preach and teach has little or no Biblical basis. By all means let us preach the **Gospel**, and not our own religious culture!

One more thing requires comment here. We need to respect the people's culture, but at the same time we must confront the kingdom of darkness. We should identify with the people, except for practices that the Bible condemns. Since the missionary is there precisely to offer an alternate worldview, he should not compromise it. Dealing with evil spirits is a central ingredient in many cultures. We need spiritual discernment to separate neutral things from those that are directly related to the demons. Such discerning is not always easy. I have referred to Hebrews 2:14 several times, but the whole sentence includes verse 15 as well, which gives us a sad but important truth. In all human cultures the fear of death enslaves people. Many practices are intended to avert death, but it is impressive to observe how often they actually contribute to it (recall that one of Satan's pastimes is to get people killed). For example, a lot of bloodshed results from the suspicion of witchcraft; the person deemed responsible is killed before he can kill. We could fill the page with further examples. I have no magic formula to offer for clearing up all doubts. Again I must content myself with calling attention to the problem. May we look to the Lord for respect and discernment!

### Prepare Yourself

The Lord Jesus prepared Himself during 30 years for three years of public ministry. Pioneer trans-cultural work is at least ten times more difficult and time consuming as ordinary evangelism (i.e. in one's own language and culture). That is right, at least ten times, and I am being cautious. Furthermore, even with the best available training and orientation, a worker who takes on a transcultural situation will certainly suffer culture shock. Culture shock is a psychological and emotional malady that results when you immerse yourself in a strange language and culture. Our psychological equilibrium is quite dependent upon routine, upon recognized procedures, upon the predictable—when we find ourselves in a situation where everything is different, where we cannot understand anything, where we do not know how to act, we become disoriented and start to feel ill. I would recommend that a new missionary not attempt more than three months without a break the first time he is isolated in a different culture. In any case, he needs to be forewarned so he will understand what is happening to him and not go into a panic supposing he is losing his mind. Each time he returns to the culture he will feel less shock.

I would declare and insist that before facing a transcultural situation a worker needs special training. To send a missionary to another land without such training is irresponsible, even criminal—the poor soul will suffer needlessly and will be less efficient and productive than he could be; and the risk of failure is greater. Biblical or theological training is necessary, but not enough. One needs the technical tools to face language and culture, and most especially when it is necessary to start from scratch.<sup>2</sup>

Some will be thinking of the second coming of Christ, the possible, if not probable, scarcity of time. If Jesus is about to return, to what extent should we 'waste' time on preparation? Well, on the basis of what I have heard and experienced I would almost say that no matter how much training you have you will still wish you had more, but obviously if no time is left to do the work the training loses its purpose and justification; we must find a middle ground.

Let us imagine that in some way God gives us a sure revelation to the effect that Jesus will return five years from today. In this way we would know that we only had five years to finish doing what remains to be done. Let us suppose we have two young men of comparable age, Biblical training (say three years of Bible School), commitment and native ability. Each one feels he should try to evangelize an unreached culture. One says: "Wow, Jesus is coming; we only have five years; I cannot afford to spend another minute on training; off I go!" And he does. The other says: "Wow, Jesus is coming; but I am not

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<sup>2</sup> Some people are born with the limitation that they can only learn the language into which they are born. As adults they are simply incapable of learning another language. Such people should be encouraged to stay at home.

ready to face a pioneer work; I will secure the technical tools first." So he spends two years in special training. In the three remaining years the second worker will achieve more than the first did in five—the first one was there, but did not know how to proceed. The longer the remaining period of time the greater will be the disparity in the achievement of the two. Without at least a minimum of specific training there is hardly any point in going to a pioneer field.

### **Implications**

In some evangelical circles it may be necessary to work at creating a new mentality, one that recognizes the realities of transcultural work. This will be especially so where they are used to fairly quick and easy results.

I believe a surgeon can readily understand the situation. To remove an appendix is simple (if it did not rupture) and is relatively inexpensive. But heart surgery is far more complex, delicate and expensive—it demands much more training and ability on the part of the surgeon. A construction engineer can also understand it. To build a house is one thing; to build a twenty-story building is another—the time, materials and knowhow cannot be compared. I wish to suggest that pioneer transcultural work is like the twenty-story building, or the heart surgery—it is much more expensive in both time and money than local evangelism, and demands more training. If we are going to take the commands of Christ seriously we must face up to this reality.

As was said at the beginning of the chapter, this strategy applies primarily to transcultural work, but not exclusively so. Someone from the middle class who tries to work in a slum area will face the sort of difficulties that have been discussed, but to a lesser extent. There are sub-cultures that require different approaches. And there are diverse ethnic communities—German descendants will think differently than Japanese descendants, or Mexican descendants, even in a third generation—that need distinct treatment. Furthermore, everyone needs to understand this strategy, for this reason: those who are not personally involved in transcultural work need to understand what the others are facing, so they can intercede intelligently, be encouraging, sympathetic and supportive, spread the vision, etc. Everyone needs to be actively involved, in some way, in the effort to fulfill the Great Commission.

Brasília, July, 2014